

# INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP



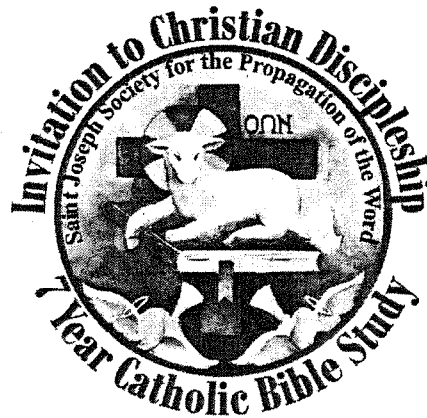
COMMENTARY ON  
THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

TEACHER'S MANUAL



# INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Seven Year Catholic Bible Study



## EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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Commentary by  
James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of the Word  
24 Boulder View  
Irvine, CA 92603  
(949) 387-6816

[www.invitetodiscipleship.org](http://www.invitetodiscipleship.org)

**NIHIL OBSTAT: Rev. Raymond Skonezny, S.S.L.  
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Bishop of Orange in California**

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Irvine, CA 92603  
949-387-6816**

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## FOREWORD

This work, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, is part of a larger, seven-year Catholic Bible study, *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*. A second component of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* consists of a summary of lectures and worksheets designed for the student, published separately under the title of *Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews*. This seven-year study has been developed for the Catholic laity so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, dwells in them.

*Thus they will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depths of Christ's love, and experience this love that surpasses all knowledge so that they may attain the fullness of God himself (Eph.3:18-19).*

The general motivating force behind this study is the preservation and growth of the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. It has four immediate goals:

1. To ensure a true spirit of repentance
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in believers
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church

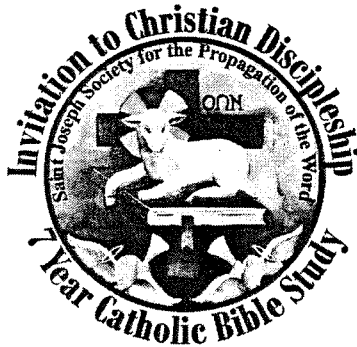
*Invitation To Christian Discipleship* has been accredited by the Catechetical Institute of the Diocese of Orange, California. It is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It is designed for a layperson to present. Books and CDs are available at [www.invitetodiscipleship.org](http://www.invitetodiscipleship.org).



# The St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of The Word Presents:

## An Invitation to Christian Discipleship

James P. O'Bryan, S.T., Author and Presenter

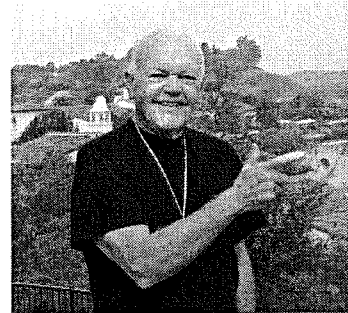


It was the early 1970's when a group of laywomen in Orange, CA approached Fr. O'Bryan about the lack of Catholic Bible studies in Orange County. There was, of course, the Protestant group nearby that had signed up over 200 Catholics to their study. Father knew he couldn't do the work without a great deal of assistance. Volunteers stepped up to do the logistical tasks and Father worked with the Holy Spirit to provide the works. This was the beginning of his "seven year sentence". Working 60 – 65 hours per week, he was never more than two weeks ahead and, most of the time he was working with less than a day to presentation time. His work was all hand written and needed to

be typed and copied for distribution. These two hour sessions (1 hour sharing + 1 hour lecture) were attended by approximately 400 people weekly, split between a morning and an evening class. Father claims he never rewrote a word; "I didn't have time", he said.

Father's efforts resulted in a seven year study plus several spin-off works used for educating Catholics around the world. The seven year study includes:

- Invitation to Christian Discipleship (Intro)
- The Gospel of St. Mark
- The Gospel of St. Luke
- Acts of the Apostles
- The Gospel of St. Matthew
- The Gospel of St. John
- Romans
- Hebrews
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Revelation



Fr. Jim

Other excellent teaching materials, often used in RCIA and formation classes, are the result of Father's dedication to the laity. These materials include, "Christian with a Capital C", "Rock Foundation Revisited" and "On Eagle's Wings". In 2005, a Group was formed to help publish and distribute Father's work. The **St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of The Word, Inc.** has been instrumental in setting up a web site and taking on the ministry of spreading the Gospel by promoting the instructional works of Fr. O'Bryan. **Materials available include teacher's manuals, student workbooks, CDs of lectures and several inspirational works for RCIA and adult education.**

The seven year study is designed to be presented by the laity or religious. Guidelines are available for starting a study group. Of particular interest is the fact that these studies are accredited by the Catechetical Institute of Orange County and have the Imprimatur through the Bishop of Orange, California.

## **Check the web site for a study near you, or start one today.**

Be advised, this is an “in depth” study of the scriptures so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, might dwell in us.

“Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ’s love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God Himself” (Eph. 3:18-19).

**<http://www.invitetodiscipleship.org>**

**(949) 842-9789 or (949) 387-6816**

**24 Boulder View  
Irvine, CA 92603**

# THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS .....	1
2. THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST.....	14
3. JESUS: PIONEER OF SALVATION.....	31
4. THE CONSEQUENCE OF DISOBEDIENCE.....	49
5. BEYOND THE INITIAL TEACHINGS.....	67
6. HIGH PRIEST IN HEAVEN .....	86
7. OBEDIENCE SAVES .....	105
8. FIDELITY TO CHRISTIAN FAITH.....	122
9. THE WAY HOME AND EPILOGUE.....	140

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING A BIBLE STUDY



# **EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS**

**The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the finest works of literature found in the New Testament. The author possessed not only an analytical mind, but also a creative one. He writes with authority, originality, and with a logical flow of thought. The work is Hellenistic in style, and its contents suggest the author to be of the Alexandrian School of Egypt. It is possible the author may have been a pupil or associate of Philo of Alexandria who dates roughly from 25 B.C. to 45 A.D. Philo's own thought processes had been greatly influenced by the mind of Plato. Since the thoughts of both these philosophical men probably directly or indirectly influenced the mind of our author, let us briefly reflect upon Plato and Philo.**

**Five hundred years before the writing of Hebrews, Plato, the Greek philosopher, taught the existence of two worlds. There is the perfect and eternal world of reality that is heavenly and spiritual. There is our present world in which there are but shadows and nebulous reflections of reality. Plato compared our present world to a cave that receives reflections of reality upon its walls. Plato taught that our knowledge in this world is partial and distorted. We do not see or know things as they truly exist; we see and know only their shadows.**

**For centuries the thoughts of Plato influenced the minds of men. Philo, influenced by Plato, believed in the pre-existence of the human souls in heaven. Presently human souls suffer an imprisonment in the body. Salvation comes through the freedom of the human soul from its earthly body, and its return to the heavenly realm. Philo undertook the monumental task of demonstrating how the Scriptures of the Old Testament supported his own platonic religious philosophy. Philo considered the Old Testament to be inspired, and he possessed a precise knowledge of it. In order to support his religious philosophy with the Scriptures, he interpreted them completely allegorically. Philo wrote of an imperfect earthly sanctuary and a perfect**

heavenly sanctuary of the pre-existent Logos--the Son of God--who freed man from his material captivity. Philo apparently equates the Logos with the Jewish Messiah. Both the authors of Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel could have been influenced by the mind of Philo.

The author of Hebrews appears to be well acquainted with the thoughts of Philo. He has been called a Philonian converted to Christianity. However, his theology differs fundamentally from Philo's. If an association with Philo existed, his Christian conversion certainly altered and redirected his theological thoughts. He gives a literal--a non-allegorical--interpretation to the sacred Scriptures. He believed the Old Testament revealed both the Messiah and the New Covenant. In a Platonic fashion he beheld the Old Testament to be but the shadow of the things to come. In Christ the heavenly world was revealed, and this same Christ enables mankind to gain access to the heavenly existence. Our author finds both Christ and the heavenly sanctuary revealed in the Old Testament. He undertakes the task to manifest to his readers those truths about Christ and His kingdom veiled and hidden within the Old Testament.

The Epistle to the Hebrews appears more to be a teaching delivered to students rather than a letter written merely to friends or acquaintances. The opening of the work lacks the customary greeting, and it launches directly into its message. Some scholars recognize the work to be a homiletical *midrash*. In Hebrew the word *midrash* means to examine, question or search. A homiletical midrash would be a commentary or explanation on certain sacred Scriptures. Jewish theologians searched the Scriptures to discover the hidden truths buried within the texts. They expounded these truths to their listeners. A midrash could either be an explanation and revelation of the hidden meaning of the text, or it could be an interpretation of the Scriptures in the light of present day situations. The midrash often took the form of a running commentary on the entire Scriptures as done by Philo, or it could be an exposition of a special text from the Scriptures as in the case with Hebrews. Hebrews has been called a homiletical midrash on Psalm 110 which expresses the following thoughts about the Messiah:

*The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool." The scepter of your power the Lord will stretch forth from Zion: "Rule in the midst of your enemies. Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendor before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you." The Lord has*

*sworn, and he will not repent: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." The Lord is at your right hand, he will crush kings on the day of the wrath (Psalm 110:1-5).*

### DATE OF COMPOSITION

The contents of the Book of Hebrews help us to establish the proximate date of its composition. At the time of its composition, many first generation Christians had already passed on. The author wrote: *"Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you; consider how their lives ended, and imitate their faith" (Heb.13:7)*. The author implies that he and his readers are second generation Christians. Speaking of the gospel message he writes, *"Announced first by the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who had heard him" (Heb.2:3)*.

The work was known and quoted before the end of the first century. When Clement, Bishop of Rome, wrote his epistle to the Corinthians in 95 A.D., he demonstrated a familiarity with the text using both its language and form. The author of Hebrews speaks of Timothy's release from prison: *"I must let you know that our brother Timothy has been set free" (Heb.13:23)*.

It is generally agreed that this Timothy was the companion of St. Paul. The author mentions a time of persecution suffered by his readers. Since the author makes no mention of the destruction of the temple and its sanctuary, many have deduced the Letter must have been written prior to 70 A.D. This would be a logical deduction if our author was writing to Jews endangered of falling back into Judaism and if his references to the sanctuary were to the sanctuary in the temple at Jerusalem. However, these references to the sanctuary apply to the sanctuary in the desert during Israel's desert sojourn. His references appear to be to the Scriptures before him, and he appears to have no interest in the nation of Israel itself. Therefore, many authors prefer a later date for the composition of the Epistle--a date some years after the persecution of Nero in 64 A.D. Our author implied there had been a time of persecution, a time for spiritual growth, but that time had been wasted. A safe conjecture would be that the Letter was written in the eighties.

### THE RECIPIENTS OF THE EPISTLE

The original recipients of this Letter are unknown. The Epistle made its first appearance in history under the title "To the Hebrews," and was never known by any other title within the early Church. The vagueness of this title



suggested to many that even very early in the Church the original recipients of the Letter were unknown. The title implies our author wrote to Jewish Christians.

However, others have been quick to point out that nothing within the contents of the Letter would exclude Gentile Christians, nor is there any reference to Jewish Christians within the Epistle. Generally speaking, we may say that our author addressed a Christian group who accepted the inspiration of the Jewish Scriptures, but who presently had no pre-occupation with Judaism and its ritual worship. The author addresses only a segment of a Christian Community. We see by the closing of the Letter that it had not been sent to the leaders of the Community or to the general body of believers. Our author writes: *“Greetings to all your leaders, and to the people of God” (Heb.13:24).*

In summary we may deduce that our author addresses himself to a group of Christians not new in the faith. Converted to the faith by early Christian apostles, they endured a persecution perhaps in which many early leaders suffered martyrdom. In the spiritual fervor of first conversion they heroically weathered their first trials and tribulations for the faith. However, with the passing of time, disappointment had set in. That expected Second Coming had not occurred--the triumph of the Christian Community was delayed within this world. They daily lived within an environment in which the apparent losses for being a Christian outweighed the gains. They were discouraged Christians--experiencing what later centuries would call the “dark night of the soul,” and they verged on abandoning their earlier Christian commitment. Many were absenting themselves from Christian worship. The daily martyrdom of Christian life has always required more grace to bear than that martyrdom that brings instant physical death. This precarious spiritual condition our author attributes to spiritual immaturity. Their Christian experience had failed to produce a mature Christian Faith. Those who should be teachers of the faith must now be fed the food of spiritual infants. Our author refers to his own work as a brief *“word of encouragement” (Heb.13:22).*

From the closing statement (omitted in the New American Bible), our author appears to be addressing a congregation in Italy: *“The saints of Italy send you greetings” (Heb.13:25b).* Those away from Italy send greetings apparently to those still in Italy. If Italy was the destination of the Letter, this would account for the fact that the first historical reference to the Epistle appeared in a letter from Clement of Rome.

## THEME AND PURPOSE

From the title of the work and a casual reading of its contents, some have deduced that our author dealt with problems peculiar to Jewish Christians. It has been suggested that certain Jewish converts became discouraged by the failure of the Jews as a whole to convert to Christianity, and they experienced nostalgia for the ritual worship of Judaism. It became more and more apparent to them that the religion of the synagogue and the Christian Church were incompatible.

The maturity of faith demanded a choice between the synagogue and the Christian community. To remain Jewish could be tantamount to apostasy as it implied a denial of Jesus as the Messiah. Judaism was passing away and must be relinquished. The author is seen as addressing himself to a crisis and conflict out of which the independent Catholic Church would arise. Therefore, it has been maintained that our author wrote to Jewish Christians to demonstrate how the sacrificial worship and priestly atonement of the New Covenant are superior to that of Judaism.

However, other scholars do not agree with this analysis. They feel a deeper insight into Hebrews reveals a more catholic intention by the author. He is not so much concerned with demonstrating how Christianity is superior to Judaism as he is to show that, in Christianity, religion reaches its fulfillment and perfection. He demonstrates from the Septuagint Bible that the Christian Faith alone fulfills the conditions of real religion. The Letter to the Hebrews does not become merely a theological treatise, it is also a vibrant statement of Christian Faith. If the recipients of his letter are falling away from the true faith, it is due to a faulty concept of Jesus Christ and the Christian Religion. This, our author seeks to correct.

Our author presents a religious philosophy unique among New Testament writers. His philosophical approach to the world, as mentioned earlier, is fundamentally Platonic. Our author believed in a heavenly existence in which all is perfect and eternal. All things on this earth, both past and present, are imperfect and transitory. They are but the shadows and reflections of the heavenly realities. He applied this belief to the Old Testament, and found there the imperfect copies of the heavenly realities. All things in the Old Testament merely symbolized and prefigured the eternally real. This implies that what one finds in the Old Testament must be considered as an imperfect pattern of the heavenly and eternal realities. Our author believed that in

order to enter into this higher realm, one must first pass through this transitory world of senses and materiality.

Our author is concerned with mankind's ascent and access to God. He sees the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man as the problem of people having union with God. The Old Testament indicates a way of access to God and therefore of freedom from sin. There existed the Levitical priesthood, and its sacrifices for the expiation of sins and for the worship of God. However, since this priesthood and its sacrifices existed in this historical world, of necessity, they were imperfect copies and imitations of the eternal realities.

In the character of Melchizedek the writer discovered a copy and symbol of a priesthood prior, and therefore superior, to that of the Levitical priesthood. For him, Melchizedek is a greater personage than Abraham. According to his logic, such a priesthood possessed a more perfect sacrifice. The priesthood of Melchizedek and its sacrifice symbolized the true and perfect priesthood and sacrifice.

Our author discovered in Jesus Christ and the Christian Religion a breakthrough of the eternal realities upon earth. Here eternity finds its most perfect reflection and representation on this earth. However, it is still in an imperfect state, to be brought to perfection only at the Coming of Jesus Christ in glory. Our author beheld in the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross, in a historical moment of time, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind. This sacrifice is eternalized. At His death, Jesus enters into the the spiritual realm, into the heavenly world as the great High Priest offering His Precious Blood for the expiation of sins.

Jesus enters into the heavenly sanctuary which is Divine Union. Jesus remains eternally there to make intercession for sinners. Through this eternal reality, all mankind now possesses the perfect sacrifice for expiation of sins and, through personal union with Jesus, man possesses the very holiness of Jesus, a holiness enabling man to achieve union with God. According to our author, man enters into union with God, not through ecstasy or mystical raptures, but through a union in faith and love with Jesus Christ.

Therefore for our author, what is seen here and now--what may empirically be experienced--is not the real. Faith for him is the conviction of these unseen realities wrought through the death of Jesus on the Cross and His entrance into heaven. Faith is confidence, here and now, that one has access to union



with God through Jesus Christ. Life on earth must be ordered and directed, not by what is seen, but by what is unseen though known through faith. He encourages his Christian readers to be confident:

*Since the blood of Jesus assures our entrance into the sanctuary...and since we have a great priest who is over the house of God, let us draw near in utter sincerity and absolute confidence...for he who made the promise deserves our trust (Heb.10:19-23).*

For our author, religion is worship of God, and worship implies a priesthood and sacrifice. In the Christian Religion, worship of God has been brought to perfection in the high priesthood of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice upon the Cross. Therefore, he proclaims Christianity to be the perfect and eternal religion on this earth. Through his philosophy of religion he demonstrates how the death of Jesus on the Cross always has, here and now, importance in the life of a Christian. Our author fails to demonstrate how this historical act in time becomes an eternal act--always was, always will be. He likewise does not demonstrate how this union with the eternal Jesus may be achieved in time. Likewise, his religious philosophy finds no place for the resurrection of Christ from the dead. The complete story must be sought elsewhere!

Even though our author extols the absolute perfection of the Christian Religion and demonstrates how foolish it is to seek another way. He feels the necessity to instill a bit of fear in his readers. He points out to them the dire consequences of apostasy from the Christian Religion. This would be an approach he would consider to be in keeping with their immaturity in the faith. We know one may exhort a child to do good for the love of goodness itself. However, more children are motivated to do good from the subjective desire to escape punishment rather than being motivated and attracted by the intrinsic value of the good deed. The author tells his readers:

*If we sin willfully after receiving the truth, there remains for us no further sacrifice for sin--only a fearful expectation of judgment and a flaming fire to consume the adversaries of God (Heb.10:26-27).*

*For if the Israelites did not escape punishment when they refused to listen as God spoke to them on earth, how much greater punishment*

*will be ours if we turn away from him who speaks from heaven!*  
(Heb.12:25b).

Although our author of Hebrews reflects an original spirit, his theology finds much confirmation in other New Testament works. Hebrews complements most the Gospel of John. We find doctrinal similarities between Hebrews and the Prologue to John's Gospel as both authors mention the pre-existence of the Son. Both works stress the royalty of Jesus and His priesthood that offers worship in spirit and truth. Both authors view the Passion of Jesus in the light of glory, and behold His death as a sacrifice for the expiation of sin. The First Letter of John speaks of Jesus as "*the expiation for our sins*" (1Jn.2:2). Hebrews sees God as the originator of all things and John's Gospel stresses the complete obedience and dependence of Jesus upon the Father. Both works see the universality of the Christian Faith and behold it as the religion for all mankind. They both viewed the Old Covenant as temporary and as having been replaced by the New Covenant. Both authors see the Jews who refused to believe in Christ as the enemies of truth and the Christian Religion. In John, the portrait of the Person of Jesus finds greater completion, while in Hebrews the work of Jesus finds greater development.

We find similarities between Peter's First Letter and Hebrews as both emphasize the sufferings of Jesus (see 1Pt.2:21; Heb.5:8). Jesus appears in both of these works as a spotless self-oblation for the sins of mankind (1Pt.1:19; Heb.9:14). They both speak of spiritual sacrifice within the Church (1Pt.2: 5, Heb.12:2), and the importance of the example of Christ for all Christians (1Pt.2:21; Heb.12:2).

We find both similarities and differences in Hebrews and the works of Paul. Both view God as the final and efficient cause of all things (Rom.2:32; Heb.2:10). Both see the Law as powerless and as having been abrogated by Christ (Rom.3:20; Heb.10:1ff). Both authors contrast the occurrence on Mt. Sinai with the Heavenly Jerusalem (Gal.4:24ff; Heb.12:18ff). The obedience of Christ (Rom.5:19; Heb.5:8) and the sacrificial aspect of his death are emphasized by both.

One of the most common Pauline expressions is "in Christ" or "In Christ Jesus." This expression is never found in Hebrews. Hebrews does not see Christians so much in Christ as approaching God through Christ. There is practically no theology of the Holy Spirit in Hebrews and no mention of justification, two things most important in Paul's writings. Paul views God as

the Father of Jesus Christ while the author of Hebrews pictures Him in an apocalyptic image of the almighty omnipotent God. Paul pictures the Church as a permanent structure, like a building with a firm foundation, while Hebrews sees the Church more as the People of God, wandering in exile until they arrive in their heavenly home. Paul's theology centers more on Christ while the theology of Hebrews centers more on God.

## THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS

This brings us to the question: who is the author of Hebrews? For many centuries it was accepted in the Church, for practical reasons, to have been written by St. Paul. Even as late as the 24th of June, 1914, the Pontifical Biblical Commission maintained that sufficient evidence did not exist in order to lawfully question Paul's authorship of Hebrews. The first expressed mention we have of the authorship of Hebrews we find made by Clement of Alexandria (150-216 A.D.). Clement writes:

*The Epistle is Paul's and that it was written to Hebrews in the Hebrew language and that Luke translated it with zealous care and published it to the Greeks, whence it is that the same complexion of style is found in the translation of this Epistle and the Acts. The ordinary phrase "Paul an Apostle" was not placed at the head of the Epistle for good reason, for in writing to Hebrews who had formed a prejudice against him and viewed him with suspicion, he was wise not to repel them at the beginning by setting his name there.*  
--Clement of Alexandria.

This statement of Clement finds no support in any other historical documents. No one ever admits seeing the Hebrew version of the text. It has been said that Origen discredits Clement by his silence. The early Church historian Eusebius quotes Origen (185-254 A.D.) as saying that everyone competent to judge language must admit that the style of the Epistle to the Hebrews is not that of Paul, but also anyone familiar with Paul's teachings must agree that the thoughts expressed in Hebrews are marvelous and in no way inferior to Paul's acknowledged writings. Origen says:

*If I were to express my own opinion I should say that the thoughts are thoughts of the apostle, but the language and the composition that of one who recalled from memory and, as it were, made notes of what was said by his master. If therefore any Church holds this*



*Epistle as Paul's, let it be approved for this also as for holding unquestioned truths, for it was not without reason that men of old time have handed it down as Paul's, that is, as substantially expressing his thoughts. But who wrote the Epistle, God only knows certainly. The account that has reached us is twofold: some say that Clement, who became bishop of the Romans wrote the Epistle, others that Luke wrote it, who wrote the Gospel and the Acts. But on this I will say no more. --Origen.*

Origen knew certain Churches did not hold the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, and in the strict sense he agreed with them. However, he felt that in a sense, it could be attributed to Paul as it expressed a doctrine worthy of Paul. In essence Origen agrees with Clement that Paul is the secondary author of Hebrews as possessed by the Church, but not the primary author. Both authors used the epistle as a work of Paul. Tertullian believed it to be primarily a work of Barnabas, and secondarily inspired by the thoughts of Paul. St. Irenaeus (140-202 A.D.) was acquainted with the work but he held that it "was not Paul's." Since Irenaeus did not use the work, it may suggest he did not accept it as authoritative Scripture.

Irenaeus seems to represent the Roman Church, which was the last to accept the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. In his own writing, Eusebius (263-340 A.D.) expressed the ambivalence in the Church towards Hebrews, as he lists the book as both "the acknowledged" and "the converted" Books. Eusebius himself held that it was originally written in Hebrew, and that Clement of Rome had translated it. He noted that some rejected the Epistle because it was controverted by the Roman Church as not being Paul's. However, he maintained that "*on the ground of its antiquity it should be reckoned with the other writings of the Apostles.*" Eusebius held it to be inspired Scripture, to be used in liturgical worship.

The Fathers in the Eastern Church followed the example of St. Athanasius (367 A.D.), who held Hebrews to be canonical and divine, and to be listed as one of the epistles of Paul. Even at the time of St. Jerome (347-420 A.D.), however, the condition described by Eusebius remained unchanged. Jerome writes: "*The custom of the Latins does not receive it among the canonical Scriptures as St. Paul's.*" Jerome considered the work to be divinely inspired and used it as such, but he remained open as to its authorship.

It seems that the attempt to tie Hebrews with Paul was to ensure its place in the Sacred Scriptures. The general testimony of the Church was that it was an inspired work; its being attributed to Paul helped win its rightful place among the inspired Scriptures. The difficulty of the Roman Church with the doctrine appears to be the harsh stand of the author on a second repentance. This doctrine was being hammered out within the Christian Community at this time. The enemies of the doctrine of a second repentance found support for their doctrine in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

St. Augustine's decisive action of having the Epistle of Hebrews listed among the inspired New Testament writings, and approved by the Three African Councils at Hippo in 393, and Carthage in 397 and 419, apparently settled the matter. After this time, even though the authorship was called into question, the scriptural authority of this book was not questioned until the Reformation.

Luther was led to attribute the authorship to Apollos. The description of Apollos in Acts described the man who in Luther's mind would have written a work like Hebrews:

*A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria and a man of eloquence... He was both an authority on Scripture and instructed in the new way of the Lord. He spoke and taught accurately about Jesus...He too began to express himself fearlessly in the synagogue...He was vigorous in his public refutation of the Jewish party as he went about establishing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 18:24ff).*

Certainly a man of that description could have written the Epistle to the Hebrews. Other scholars have proposed their own candidates such as Stephen, the first martyr; Philip the Evangelist; Peter the Apostle; Silas the missionary who accompanied Paul. The scholar, Harnack, proposes the lady missionary, Prisca. The absence of a name on the epistle indicated to him the author was a woman. Her name was omitted because the authority of a woman would not have been acceptable to the time.

St. Caietan who lived at the time of the Reformation quotes the statement of Jerome, and concludes that one cannot confidently hold Paul to be the author of the Epistle, however, in keeping with common custom, he will call it Pauline.

In 1955, the Secretary of the Biblical Commission stated that all past decrees of the Biblical Commission concerning the authors of the Sacred Books and their time of composition were not binding on Catholic Scripture scholars. These matters were opened for research and discussion. However, after much research and discussion we seem to be able to say no more than Origen did some eighteen hundred years ago: Only God knows who wrote Hebrews!

Concerning the author of Hebrews, I would like to conclude with the words expressed by Dr. James Moffatt:

*To sum up: He has a sense of literary nicety, which enters into his earnest religious argument without rendering it artificial or over-elaborate. He has an art of words, which has more than an unconscious sense of rhythm. He has the style of a trained speaker; it is style, yet style at the command of a devout genius...his words do not follow each other in mechanically necessary order, but are arranged so as to emphasize their relative importance, and to make the sentences effective as well as intelligible. One may say that he deals with the biblical language as a preacher, whose first duty is to be faithful, but his second to be eloquent. Dr. James Moffatt (Epistle to Hebrews).*

The Book of Hebrews comes to us today as a product of the primitive Christian Church. As we study this work we cannot but be impressed by the quality of mind and spirit that produced such a unique contribution to the Christian Faith. Although its authorship has been questioned for centuries, it comes to us out of the early Christian Community with an assurance of its divine inspiration. The early Church, generally speaking, was always consciously aware of the divine inspiration of the Letter. Its theology--its divine message--is set within a Platonic and Philonian framework and background foreign to the thought of many today. The proper interpretation of these divinely inspired Scriptures demand an understanding of the philosophical mentality of its author. The Second Vatican Council reminds students of the Sacred Scriptures:

*The interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words... The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in the particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture (Rev.1:11-12).*

Therefore, a proper study and interpretation of the Book of Hebrews certainly proposes problems for biblical students today. Perhaps the words of the author of Hebrews best describe the challenge and reward that lie before us who are willing to properly and diligently study this Epistle:

*Let us, then, go beyond the initial teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, not laying the foundation all over again: repentance from dead works, faith in God, instruction about baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And, God permitting, we shall advance! (Heb.6:1-3).*

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

#### INTRODUCTION

The author of Hebrews was a literary artist. He used all the power of his art to describe, in impeccable Greek, his sublime concept of Jesus Christ. His presentation takes us past the Cross of Christ and His Resurrection and beyond the Ascension to Christ in glory. His opening sentence, like an overture to a great symphony, expresses the main themes to be developed within the general body of his work from chapter one through chapter twelve, verse twenty-nine. He opens with a long sentence having God the subject of the first two verses, and the Son of God the subject of the last two verses. He proclaims the absolute finality of the divine revelation received through Jesus Christ. Then he establishes the Son's relationship to the cosmos--the created universe. The Son is revealed not as a created being but as the Creator under God. The Son is presented as Creator of the universe. He establishes a vital relationship between creation and redemption. He who created the universe personally expiates the sins of the world--redeems mankind.

#### THE FINAL REVELATION

In the first verse our author declares God has spoken in this world, and man has heard: "*In many places (polumeros) God spoke in the past to the fathers through the prophets.*" The Greek expressions, "in many places" and "many ways" imply divine revelation has been diffused, not only geographically, but likewise expressed to mankind through many modes and methods. The expression "many ways" implies God reveals His Will to mankind through those avenues open to Him, as through dreams and visions, through symbolic manifestations such as the plagues of Egypt, the column of smoke and pillar of fire in the desert, and the bright cloud over the tabernacle.

God likewise spoke through natural events. The psalmists declare that the heavenly bodies--the sun, the moon, and the stars--are wordless revelations that constantly proclaim, night and day, the glory of God throughout the universe. St. Paul teaches that un-perverted human reason and conscience

reveal God's Will to human beings. The Scriptures reveal that God speaks through spiritual beings called angels who as intermediaries bring God's personal message to men, as Gabriel did to Zachariah and to Mary.

And of course God speaks in and through people called prophets. A prophet becomes God's mouth-piece in the world. A true prophet speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking there are two concepts of a prophet. The first reduces the prophet to nothing more than a mechanical instrument. He seems to be no more than a harp or lyre upon which the Holy Spirit plays. This seems to reflect more the pagan concept in which God speaks through prophets in an ecstatic state or while in a trance. The second, the biblical concept, seems much more personal and more in keeping with God's respect for the freedom of the human will. Here God speaks within the spirit of the prophet and the prophet interprets God's message to the people. Sometimes he expresses the message verbally and at other times through symbolic behavior.

At times inspiration acted as a very compulsive force, but the freedom of the will remained. The Scriptures reveal that there were reluctant prophets. St. Paul teaches "*the spirits of the prophet are under the control of the prophet*" (1Cor.14:32). Within this concept of prophecy the Lord could never reveal more than the mind and heart of the prophet could bear or comprehend. On rare occasions God manifested Himself directly to individuals, such as Abraham and Moses. The reference of our author to "the fathers" would include the entire succession of Old Testament personages who spoke for God before and after Moses.

The Scriptures certainly confirm the truth that God communicates with mankind. A poet once wrote, "*God is not dumb that He should speak no more. If you hear not His voice today—'tis thy soul that is poor.*" Upon the door of man's conscious awareness God knocks constantly seeking an entrance. Too often worldly static and personal preoccupation jam all avenues of communication. Our channels must be open in order to receive divine communication. For this reason saints of God sought and seek external silence, but more important one needs internal silence in order to hear the voice of God.

Scripture says, "*If you hear the voice of God today, harden not your heart.*" This implies one must not only hear, but obey--have the goodwill to respond. It is one thing for the mind to discover the Will of God and another thing for



the heart to embrace it. For this reason men and women of God seek the freedom of spirit that gives one the liberty to follow the Will of God. For this reason Father Judge encouraged the members of the Cenacle to pray both for Wisdom and Fortitude. In the expression of St. Therese of Lisieux, many Christians are birds with wings stuck in the mud. They are earthen-bound creatures who hear His call and desire to fly but can only look longingly to the sky.

## THESE LAST DAYS

The author, in his opening statement, makes reference to the revelations of the Old Testament as being like grains of wheat that are scattered over the fields of time--as being revealed here and there over the centuries. When he goes on to say "*in this, the final age, he has spoken to us through his Son,*" he desires to contrast the revelations of the Old Testament with that revelation now possessed by the Christian Community. It is not an attempt to contrast natural revelation with supernatural revelation, but to contrast the words of promise made through the Old Testament prophets and the fulfillment of these promises in and through the Son. The revelations of the Old Testament were imperfect and incomplete, not that they lacked validity and veracity, but because they contained promises rather than fulfillment. In God's Son, Jesus Christ, divine revelation has been perfected and completed because Jesus Christ is God's final word to the world. For this reason Paul wrote to the Galatians:

*For even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him! I repeat what I have just said: if anyone preaches a gospel to you other than the one you received, let a curse be upon him! (Gal.1:8-9).*

Therefore the Christian Religion cannot accept any claims of divine revelations that teach a different Christ or proclaim a new gospel (other means of salvation), as for example what is now being taught by the Mormons, the Jehovah Witnesses, and the Swamies from the East.

When our author writes God "*has spoken to us through his Son,*" it is not primarily a reference to the verbal revelations or spoken words given by Jesus Christ, but rather to the entire life of Jesus as being God's spoken Word--His expressed Will. The revelation revealed through the Son is especially the

divine plan of salvation brought to fulfillment by God's sending His Son into the world, who died the sacrificial death on the Cross, and subsequently ascended to the right hand of God where that Son now intercedes for mankind.

As its hallmark, early Christian preaching proclaimed that the age of fulfillment (foretold through the prophets) had arrived in Jesus Christ. By his reference to these last days, our author implies the final age of the world has arrived. This would be a Semitic expression of time. The Semitic mentality did not grasp the concepts of past and future as we do. Their words for past are those words expressing before, or in front of one, and their words for the future or tomorrow all refer to something behind one or in back of one. From the realistic point of the Semitic, the past or present was something known, and so they spoke of it as something before their eyes--in front of them. In other words, they could see the past and the present. The future they could not see or know, so they spoke of the future, not as something ahead of one, but as something behind or in back of one. "In this, the final age" implies that the future and final age have arrived. It was a common belief of the times that, with the coming of the Messiah, one age would come to an end (violently many believed) and the final messianic age would begin.

We see from the Scriptures that, despite the fact of the coming of the Messiah, the old age continues in existence. Jesus refers to this present age as "*an evil, faithless age*" (Mt.16:4). There is a closing to St. Mark's Gospel found in some manuscripts, and known to St. Jerome, that has this interesting account. The disciples excused their disbelief in the resurrection of Christ with these words:

*"This lawless and faithless age is under Satan, who does not allow what is unclean and dominated by spirits to grasp the true power of God." [The resurrected] Christ replied: "The measure of the years of Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things are imminent" (after close of Mark 16:14).*

This could imply that the power of Satan had reached its zenith and now declines yet still is a ruling force in the world. St. Paul attributes the unbelief of the Jews to Satan:

*Their unbelieving minds have been blinded by the god of the present age so that they do not see the splendor of the gospel showing forth the glory of Christ, the image of God (2Cor.4:4).*

Paul tells the Galatians that Jesus died *“to rescue us from the present evil age”* (Gal.1:4). He warned the Romans, *“Do not conform yourselves to this age”* (Rom.12:2). *“Our salvation is closer than when we first accepted the faith. The night is far spent; the day draws near”* (Rom.13:11c-12a). The author of Hebrews believed the new age had come with Jesus’ Ascension into heaven. The Gospel of Matthew supports this belief. We read, *“I give you my solemn word,”* says Jesus to His disciples, *“in the new age when the Son of Man takes his seat upon a throne befitting his glory...”*(Mt.19:28). This could imply the new age began with Jesus’ Ascension into heaven. However, the Gospel of Mark implies that this evil age will not be ended until the Second Coming of Jesus. We read that Jesus said to His disciples: *“If anyone in this faithless and corrupt age is ashamed of me and my doctrine, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes with the holy angels in his Father’s glory”*(Mk.8:38).

Perhaps we can say that presently the new age has come on like a divine leaven, seeking to permeate the evil environment of this present age. Apparently the two kingdoms (light, darkness) are presently here on earth, and for a time both survive side-by-side. And so Paul warns all Christians to take care and *“do not conform yourself to this age.”*

## TWO DIMENSIONS OF CHRIST

The opening words of this Epistle leave no doubt about the status and nature of this Son of God. Our author first makes clear the Son’s relationship to this world. God has appointed him *“heir of all things and through whom he first created the universe”* (Heb.1:2b). The world belongs to Christ both as man and as God. Our author sees Christ as entering into possession of all things at His Ascension to the right hand of God. However, as the pre-existing Son of God He created the universe. As its Maker He was Lord of the world from its creation.

The concept of Jesus being appointed heir calls to mind the son of a King who receives as an inheritance the realm of his father by a regal decree, as Solomon received the kingdom from his father David. Some scholars believe that no definite time is intended by the expression *“appointed heir,”* but it implies an act of the eternal order rather than one of time. However, we must realize that the Scriptures often present Christ in His incarnational dimension. It emphasizes the humanity of the Son of God by treating and speaking of Him as a human being. It seems to express the idea that when God’s Son became man, He temporarily surrendered His divinity and laid it

aside: *“Though he was in the form of God...he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate...(Phil.2:6-7).*

This teaching is symbolically expressed in John when he writes that Jesus *“rose from the meal and took off his cloak. He picked up a towel and tied it around himself.”* Here John symbolically expresses the Incarnation--the Son of God becoming man. When Jesus’ work of redemption was completed--symbolized by the washing of the feet of His disciples, we read, *“After he had washed their feet, he put his cloak back on and reclined at table once more”(Jn.12:4,13).*

The Son of God reassumes this “discarded” divinity after His death and resurrection, but as God-Man--as Jesus Christ. Our author shares the view stated by Paul in Romans 1:3f, that insofar as His human nature was concerned, Jesus Christ became Son of God at His resurrection and ascension. However, the sonship received is based upon the relationship the Son possessed prior to the Incarnation. It must not be understood that the Scriptures imply Christ previously lacked divine Sonship. The title “Son” belonged to Him always! We read in Romans: *“God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom.8:3).*

We find in Galatians: *“But when the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law” (Rom.4:4).* And John writes, *“Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (Jn.3:16).* Those words of Paul, *“in the likeness of sinful flesh,”* could aptly express, as understood by the early Church, Jesus’ natural condition prior to His resurrection. When the Scriptures imply that Jesus entered into divine sonship at His resurrection and ascension, and received the universe as His inheritance, it is not a new status. Rather it is but a “re-entry” into a condition that had always been His, but one not previously experienced in his human nature. The Scriptures seem to imply that the conscious experience of His divine nature normally was suspended during His earthly life until the Resurrection.

We are accustomed to thinking of God the Father as Creator of the Universe. Our author confirms this, but he reveals that the Father created the universe through the operation of the Son when he writes, *“through whom he first created the universe.”* In a sense creation is attributed both to the Father and

Son. There are other Scriptures that also teach the Son to be the agent of creation. St. John tells us:

*Through him all things came into being and apart from him nothing came to be...He was in the world and through him the world was made, yet the world did not know who he was (Jn.1:3,10).*

*All things were created by him and in him (Col.1:6).*

In Corinthians Paul speaks of the “*one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom everything was made*” (1Cor.8:6).

Hebrews makes clearly visible the essential nature of the Son. Our author writes: “*This Son is the reflection of the Father’s glory, the exact representation of the Father’s being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word*” (Heb.1:3a-b).

## A DIVINE PORTRAIT

Our author presents a divine portrait of the Son by employing two images understandable to men. The first image he suggests by using the word *apaugasma*. The Son is the *apaugasma* of God’s glory. The word can be understood in an active sense of “radiance”. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory--of His divine nature in the world. As the heavenly sun radiates light and heat, the Son of God radiates the very essence or nature of God. Or *apaugasma* can be understood in the passive sense of “reflection” or “refulgence”. As a mirror reflects the splendor of the sun, so the Son of God perfectly reflects, in this world, the nature of God.

Most present day scholars accept the passive sense of reflection because it seems warranted by the second image used, and also because this term of the author appears to be influenced by the use of the word in Wisdom 7:26. The word “reflection” seems more appropriate for a Son incarnated in this world: it also expresses the distinction between the Father and Son. At the same time when our author writes that the Son “*is the reflection of God’s glory,*” he teaches the divine source of the Son's nature and of its unbroken relationship with the divine nature.

The writer creates his second image by using the word *charakter*. The son is the exact *charakter* of the Father's being. The Greek word *charakter* implies a "stamp" or "engraving" such as one would find on a coin. The word "character" came to express the personality of a person. Our author describes the personality of the Son when he writes the Son is "*the exact representation of the Father's being.*" This implies that the Son does not merely resemble certain aspects of the Father, but He is the exact representation of His essence, thereby revealing to mankind the divine attributes of God. The Son is not a representation of the Person of the Father, but rather a representation of the essence and nature of the Father. In the Incarnate Son the essence of God becomes knowable in the world. St. Paul speaks of Christ being "*the eikon (image or ikon) of the invisible God.*" Such Scriptures clearly support the divinity of the Son, who could not be an image or exact representation of the Father unless He, the Son, possessed the Divine Nature. We know that "light" has always been ascribed to God in the Scriptures, and the Son is presented as possessing the very light of God.

It is in virtue of the Son's divine nature that our author states, "*And he sustains all things by his powerful word.*" The Greek expression implies that the Power of the Son continually sustains the existence of the world. By His power the world came into existence, and by His power it is sustained in existence. Not in the sense of the song—"He's got the whole world in His hands!"--or in the sense of an Atlas with the weight of the world upon his shoulders, but rather it is through the activity of the Son that the world—creation--comes to its perfect fulfillment. The author attributes to the Son the Divine Providence that governs and directs the universe.

The words, expressions, and concepts used by the author are not original. They indeed reflect the Alexandrian influence upon the author. First of all his terminology reflects that of Philo, who likewise spoke of the Logos, or the Word, as the Image of God, the angel of God, the ray of the sun, the exact representation of divine power. The thoughts of our author echo certain expressions and concepts to be found in the wisdom literature of the Jews. In these Scripture writings Wisdom is personified--presented as a living person.

Apparently the early Church saw the Messiah Himself being pre-figured in this literature. Along with the Evangelist John, our author presents Christ as the personification and incarnation of Wisdom. We read in the Book of Proverbs of Wisdom being presented as a pre-existing heavenly figure who was present with God before creation, and acting as the "master craftsman"



through whom God laid the foundation of the world (see Prv.8:30). The Book of Wisdom, written in Egypt by a member of the Jewish Community at Alexandria, certainly influenced the author of Hebrews. This book speaks of Wisdom as being the sustainer and governor of the universe (See Wis.8:1):

*For she is an aura of the might of God and a pure effusion of the glory of the almighty...the refulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness (Wis. 7:25-26).*

We have already seen that Paul spoke of the Son as the agent of creation (Col.8:6), the sustainer of the universe (Col.1:17), and as the Image of God (Col.1:15). The author of Hebrews reflects an image of Christ supported both by Paul and John. As one commentator remarked, "he stands in the mainstream of New Testament Christology."

Our author touches the main themes to be developed within the body of the Epistle when he writes: "*When he had cleansed us from our sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs*" (Heb.1:3b-4). The interest of our author, as already mentioned, is not directed toward the teachings of Jesus, but rather toward what flows from the crucifixion of Jesus and from his present position in glory.

## REDEEMER AND LORD

The writer has expressed the eternal activity of the Son in his relationship as Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Now he centers the attention of his readers upon the work accomplished on this earth, in time, by the Son--the purification from sin. Our English translation makes clear that he has "cleansed us from *our* sins," however, the Greek texts seem to imply, "when the Son had been purified of sin." The author does not wish to imply Christ sinned (later he will teach that he is like us in all things but sin), but rather that Christ is the personification, the representation of sinful humanity.

Our author may well have had in mind the image of the Jewish high priest when he wrote these words. In the Old Testament the high priest must first be purified of all sins before he could enter the Holy of Holies upon the Day of Atonement. Our author seeks to emphasize here that our High Priest, Jesus Christ, enters sinless into the heavenly sanctuary. He sees Jesus' crucifixion as

a sin offering for the cleansing of the community of its sins.

The word translated cleansed or purified can signify a purgation of sins in the sense of a removal of the disease of sin. Or it can signify, as is probably the case here, of a cleansing from sin--of making something pure, uncontaminated in order that it can become a holy offering to God, or used in divine worship. The writer relates that when the purified Christ enters into the heavens "*he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*" These words express more than Christ merely taking His seat in glory. They imply a royal enthronement and the Son's entrance into divine authority. The author's words deliberately call to mind the words of Psalm 110: "*Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.*"

### SUPERIOR TO ANGELS

Christ is presented not only as Son, but as King. This twofold position of being both Son and King makes it doubly clear that Christ is higher than the angels of heaven. He certainly is not to be considered now less than the angels--even though as man he had become less than the angels--and he is not to be equated with the angels. Jesus Christ has inherited a name "superior to theirs." Therefore His nature is superior to that of the angels. It is implied that at the moment Jesus Christ assumes His new status, signified by His enthronement in heaven, He receives a new name. In the Semitic thought a name designates the being of a person, and the changing of a name indicates some essential change within the person. In the mind of our author, Christ receives the title of Royal Son. This new name, in St. Paul's mind, is identified when he writes in Philippians:

*God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: JESUS CHRIST IS LORD! (Phil.2:9-11).*

Our author goes to some lengths to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over the angels, which indicates that this matter touches upon a particular problem faced by the recipients of his letter. We know from Colossians that an exaggerated cult of angels existed at this time. Paul warns them, "*Do not be taken in by people who like groveling to angels and worshipping them*" (Col.2:18). The author of Revelation tells us that he fell at the feet of an angel

*“to worship him but the angel said to him, ‘No, get up! I am merely a fellow servant with you and your brothers who give witness to Jesus’” (Rv.19:10).*

Because of their Jewish background, certain Christians had difficulty accepting the divinity of Jesus as we can see from the early rise of the *Ebionite* heresy in the Church which denied the divinity of Christ. Some may have considered Christ inferior to the angels while others may have sought a happier compromise by holding the Christ to be an angel. Philo had spoken of the Logos as being an angel. Arianism, a later heresy, would make Christ superior to angels but inferior to God. A belief existed among the Jews that Michael the archangel acted as priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

The cult of angels developed along with Jewish theology. Later Jewish theology emphasized the transcendency of God; it viewed God as above and removed from the universe. The cult of angels developed along with this theology. In the light of the transcendency of God, the communications of Yahweh in the Old Testament were re-interpreted. The “angel of Yahweh” was not Yahweh Himself, but His personal intermediary. The word angel comes from the Latin *angelus* which is a transcription of the Greek word *angelos*. Both *angelos* and its Hebrew equivalent *mal'ak* mean messenger. Angels were considered as messengers and servants of Yahweh. God controlled and ruled the universe through the ministries of angels. Angels guided and guarded the People of God. We read in Exodus:

*See, I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on the way and bring you to the place I have prepared. Be attentive to him and heed his voice. Do not rebel against him...My authority resides in him (Ex.23:20-21).*

The angels were the hosts of Yahweh--a celestial army. The psalmist says:

*Bless the Lord, all you his angels, you mighty in strength, who do his bidding, obeying his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, his ministers, who do his will (Ps.103:20-21).*

Isaiah describes the Seraphim who minister before the throne of Yahweh:

*I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with*

*two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!" they cried one to the other. "All the earth is filled with his glory!" (Is.6:1-3).*

**We read in First Kings: "I saw the Lord seated on his throne, with the whole host of heaven standing by to his right and to his left" (1Kgs.22:19).**

**Angels made intercession before God for men. The angel said to Tobit:**

*It was I who presented and read the record of your prayer before the Glory of the Lord... I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord (Tb.12:12b,15,18a).*

**According to Daniel the angels are without number. Describing the throne of God he writes: "A surging stream of fire flowed out from where he sat: Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him" (Dn.7:10).**

**Generally, it was believed that God called the angels out of the stream of fire around His throne. After they sang their praises of God they returned to the stream of fire from whence they came. At God's word angels were changed instantly into winds and fire. Some held angels to be composed of an ethereal fiery substance like blazing light. Jesus confirmed the existence of angels and of their service to men. He tells His disciples: "See that you never despise one of these little ones, I assure you, their angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father's face" (Mt. 18:10).**

**In the Garden of Gethsemane we are told, "An angel then appeared to him from heaven to strengthen him" (Lk.22:43).**

**At His arrest Jesus said to His disciples: "Do you not suppose I can call on my Father to provide at a moment's notice more than twelve legions of angels" (Mt.26:53).**

**Jesus told the Sadducees that the resurrected in heaven will be like the angels "and are no longer liable to death" (Lk.20:36). The New Testament speaks of angels as being spiritual beings (*pneumata*) and contrasts them with human beings who are "flesh and blood" (See Eph.6:12).**

The Catholic Church confirms that in the beginning of time, God created spiritual essences (angels) out of nothing and that the nature of angels is spiritual (*de fideo*). The natural immortality of the angels flows from the pure spirituality of their nature. They possess understanding and free will. Because of the pure spirituality of their natures they are superior to men (see 2Pt.2: 11). Their primary task is the glorification and service of God. Their secondary task is the protection of mankind and the care of their salvation. The Psalmist writes: *“For to his angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways”* (Ps.91:11). St. Basil wrote: *“Everyone of the faithful has an angel standing by his side as educator and guide, directing his life”* St. Jerome made this observation: *“How great is the value of the human soul that every single person has from birth received an angel for his protection.”*

The author of Hebrews proceeds to demonstrate from the Old Testament Scriptures the superiority of Christ over the angels. He uses seven quotations to establish the truth that the One Son is greater than all the angels as He is the Son whom the angels must worship. This Son exceeds all the angels in power and He has been exalted above them as He is seated at the right hand of God. In his first argument he quotes Psalm 2:7 and Second Samuel 7:14 to establish the unique sonship of Christ. He writes:

*To which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my son; today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be his father and he shall be my son”? (Heb.1:5). [The author quotes from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14]*

Even though the angels are at times called “sons of God,” the words, *“You are my son; this day I have begotten you”* have never been addressed to any angel. The words, *“I will be his father, and he shall be my son,”* are words of a divine promise given to King David by the prophet Nathan. They primarily refer to the successors of David, but apply as well to the Messiah who was to be of the House of David. This Scripture implies that on the day David’s successor comes to royal power, at that moment, he is “begotten” as the Son of God.

In the second argument, the author refers to the Christ as the “first born,” which gives him the right of inheritance; the angels are commanded to worship him: *And again, when he leads his first-born into the world, he says, “Let all the angels of God worship him”* (Heb.1:6). This probably does not refer to the Incarnation by which the Son became inferior to the angels but rather

to the Second Coming of Christ in glory, when he will be proclaimed Lord, and *“every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth.”* All things are subjected to Christ and not to the angels.

The author stresses the essential difference between the nature of the Son and the nature of the angels. He equates the angels with the changeable natures of wind and fire, thereby equating them to mere instruments in the service of God. *“Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his ministers flaming fire’”* (Here Psalm 104:4 is being quoted.) However to the Son he applies these words of Psalm 45: 7-8, that confirm the enduring rule of the Son because of His divine sonship:

*But of the Son, “Your throne, O God, stands forever and ever; a righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved justice and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellow kings”* (Heb.1:8-9)

The author quotes this psalm to stress the permanence of the Son’s kingdom that results from his royal enthronement, symbolized as having been anointed by God. Through his next quote (taken from Psalm 102:26-28) our writer attributes creation to the Son:

*And, “Lord, of old you established the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; all of them will grow old like a garment... They will be changed but you are the same, and your years will have no end”* (Heb.1:10-12).

As Creator of all things, the power of the Son will never diminish. He is beyond and above all change. He remains forever. The final quote comes from Psalm 110 and stresses once again the distinction between Christ and the angels. Only Christ has been exalted to the right hand of God. The author asks, *“To which of the angels did God ever say, ‘Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool’?”* No angel can ever possess the glory that belongs to Christ. Of the angels he asks, *“Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation?”* (Heb.1:14). With this final statement he establishes the true position of angels. Their chief function is to give help to those who are being saved through Christ’s redemptive work.



The angels are instruments of Christ to bring men to salvation. This emphasizes that the angels are not proper objects of worship. He leaves no doubt that Christ is a proper object of our worship.

### JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

Our author began with the Incarnation of Christ and has ended with the Exaltation of Christ. In this section, some scholars have noted a reflection of the ancient enthronement ceremony of the New East that occurred in several stages. First, the new king is elevated to divine status; second, he is presented for worship; third, his everlasting lordship is proclaimed; and lastly, he is enthroned. The author has once again presented the status of Christ in glory after having passed through the crucible of suffering.

From this foundation the author now stresses the importance of the gospel message:

*Announced first by the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who had heard him. God then gave witness to it by signs, miracles, varied acts of power, and distribution of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as he willed (Heb.2:3b-4).*

He is contrasting the revelation received by the Christian Community with that received in the Old Testament. He exhorts his readers to remain faithful, and warns that a failure to do so could have dire consequences for them. *“For if the word spoken through angels stood unchanged, and all transgression and disobedience received its due punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as ours?” (Heb. 2:2-3a).*

He seeks to impress upon them the seriousness of the situation. This gospel is not to be taken lightly. Their acceptance and living of the gospel would determine their salvation, *“In view of this, we must attend all the more to what we have heard, lest we drift away” (Heb.2:1).* His words seem to imply that there was a spirit of growing indifference--a lukewarmness--that could result, not in a deliberate rejection of the gospel, but in an almost unconscious drifting away from Christ and the gospel--often expressed by staying away from Christian worship services.

Perhaps at the root of this drifting away from Christ was the apparent human weakness demonstrated by Christ and the humiliations suffered in His earthly life. Our author now turns his readers' attention to the humiliation endured by Christ. He teaches that this humiliation has led to the exaltation of Christ. He applies the words of Psalm 8:5-7 to Christ:

*What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels, you crowned him with glory and honor, and put all things under his feet (Heb.2:6b-8).*

The exaltation of Christ has already occurred, but it is not apparent here and now on earth. However, it will be when Jesus Christ comes in glory. He writes:

*For he did not make the world to come--that world of which we speak--subject to angels... In subjecting all things to him, God left nothing unsubjected. At present we do not see all things thus subject, but we do see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death:*

*“Jesus who was made for a little while lower than angels, that through God’s gracious will he might taste death for the sake of all men” (Heb.2:5,8-9).*

These words of the author certainly echo those sentiments expressed by St. Paul in Philippians:

*He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name (Phil.2:7b-9).*

Our author reiterates the great truth revealed in the first three verses of Hebrews: Jesus Christ is Lord! Jesus Himself confirmed, *“All power in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Mt.28:18).*

As our author pointed out, at present we do not see all things subject to Christ. But with the eye of faith we already behold Jesus Christ as the Lord of glory. The Church confirms that in this present age Satan still holds a certain

dominion because of *sin*. St. John tells us that the whole world is under the power of the Evil One. He exercises this dominion and power unless impeded by the Lord. We ought not to leave the situations and circumstances of our lives open to this evil dominion.

Our belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ ought to find a practical expression in our daily lives. In all situations--but especially in times and moments of weakness and stress--we ought to invite and invoke Jesus to express His Lordship here and now in our lives. However, the present expression of that Lordship will not be measured by desire, but by the nature of the Lord. It will find its expression in justice, mercy, and love.

Regardless of how the Lord chooses to express His Lordship, such a holy practice opens all the dimensions of one's life to divine intervention. Do I really believe that all power in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus Christ? Do I really believe that he has power in this particular circumstance, and that he can express that power here and now? Then I should live with a faith that expresses in a most practical manner, **JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!**

## CHAPTER 3

### JESUS, PIONEER OF SALVATION

#### INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures teach “the just man lives by faith.” A Christian can only live a righteous life by being directed by the principles of Christian Religion whose foundation primarily rests upon faith and only secondarily in human reason. There is always the tendency for a Christian to lower his or her sights and see life only in its earthly dimension--to judge and measure one’s life by its empirical experiences, by what one feels and experiences here and now. This can cause Christian life to become desperate and hopeless.

Faith in Jesus Christ that truly incarnates itself in the life of a believer is the ground of one’s hope. The power of Hope enables the person to raise his eyes from the present situation and behold what blessings the future offers. A man of hope knows that the here and now--regardless of how pleasant or painful--is not the end all and be all. Regardless of one’s present circumstances, the hopeful person knows the future will bring what faith has promised. The object of our hope is always presently absent. As Paul teaches:

*Hope is not hope if its object is seen~ how is it possible to hope for what he sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance (Rom.8:24-25).*

Faith confirms that what now occurs within the life of a Christian makes possible that future promise. Christian Faith confesses with Paul: “*We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree*” (Rom.8:28).

Even if the present situation is evil, a Christian may experience joy amidst the evil, as did St. Ignatius of Antioch when he stood facing death in a Roman arena. Hope gives the Christian spirit a buoyant quality that elevates it above despair and defeat to a dimension of joyous existence amidst life’s trials, tribulations and disappointments. “*We have put our hope in him who will never cease to deliver us*” (2Cor.1:10).

Hope expresses itself in patient endurance. Christian patience becomes visible when a person faces and endures evil without despair or sadness of spirit. Hope is not only the root of patience, it is also the root of faithfulness. In time of temptation one does not fall away but remains firmly committed to Jesus Christ and the Christian life. For this reason Paul teaches *"In hope we were saved"* (Rom.8:24a).

Many Christians drift away from the Faith when their hope in Christ does not eliminate the pains and sufferings of human existence, or does not preserve them or those they love from all life's physical and social evils. Paul wrote, *"If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of men"* (1Cor.15:19). The quality of such faith is poor and its poverty may be due to its misconception about Jesus Christ and the Christian Religion. The blind too often have led the blind!

The recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews apparently fit the above description. Their faith in Christ had been weakened. As yet they had not abandoned the Faith. However, there was a real danger of apostasy from the Christian Religion. Perhaps they were flirting with some cult of the angels that appeared to offer certain immediate "spiritual" gratification. If they were losing hope in Christ and the Christian Religion, this would indicate a problem of Faith--perhaps a problem of faith rising out of a faulty concept of salvation?

Their present spiritual condition had been stimulated by their Christian experience; they experienced a deep disappointment in their Christian faith; their expectations had not been met. They experienced a spiritual letdown accompanied, no doubt, by spiritual depression. As one poet wrote, *"One thing appears to me--The work is not complete. One world I know, and see. It is not at his feet--Not, Not! Is this the sum?"* Their faith in a Crucified Christ was being challenged--by the ridicule of the Gentiles, who could not fathom anyone believing in a Lord of such evident weakness that he could not even save himself, much less his followers; and by the scorn of the Jews, who found the thought that the Messiah could die a cursed death upon a Cross abhorrent and blasphemous. Did not the Scriptures teach, *"Cursed is he that hangs upon a tree?"*

In the early days of their conversion, their faith had been stimulated by the belief in an imminent, triumphant return of Jesus Christ in glory. At this return their tears would turn to joy; their Christian lives, now scorned and

ridiculed, would be vindicated before the world; they would be exalted above all their enemies. *Paul had written, "Our salvation is closer than when we first accepted the faith. The night is far spent; the day draws near" (Rom.13:11-12).* In the strength of this hope, they bravely bore persecution.

However, the months passed, and so did the years, and nothing changed. Their faith still had to bear the scandal of Christ Crucified, which was bearable only in the light of Jesus' imminent and triumphant return to earth, a triumph in which they would share. Their sorrows had not been turned into joy. They had only multiplied. The temptation grew within their hearts--perhaps their enemies are right? They were tempted to abandon the Christian Faith.

The author of Hebrews seeks to impede such a spiritually disastrous step. He seeks both to enlighten and admonish his readers. He seeks to strengthen their commitment to Jesus Christ by demonstrating that He is the veritable Son of God, pre-existing from all eternity. God had sent His Son into the world as its Savior, and there is no other means by which human beings may be saved. The Christian Religion alone is the true and perfect religion, for it is the fulfillment of God's promise to mankind, and it alone makes it possible for mankind to fulfill the end purpose of religion, which is reconciliation with God. The words once expressed by St. Peter perfectly echo the author's sentiments. Jesus said to the Twelve:

*"Do you want to leave me too?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one" (Jn.6:67-69).*

The author of Hebrews seeks to convince his readers that Jesus Christ is "God's holy one," and there is not another in whom holiness may be achieved. He powerfully demonstrates to them the present and eternal value of the sufferings and death of Christ. He points out how the manner and mode of Jesus' death was willed by God as the means of salvation for mankind. He will clarify, for his readers, what is the privileged position of Christians on this earth. In other words, what are the blessings of being a Christian.

Our author teaches his readers that Jesus Christ is superior to angels because He possesses a nature superior to theirs. He is the pre-existing Son of God, and as Jesus Christ He has been exalted and enthroned "*at the right hand of*

*God.*” He now turns his readers’ attention to the Incarnation of God’s Son, and its implications for all Christians. He will seek to explain why the Incarnation demanded the sufferings and death of God's Son and what this means to Christians.

## THE EXTENT OF THE INCARNATION

The writer’s first step is to clarify this human nature assumed by the Son of God and the human condition into which the Son of God entered. He quotes Psalm 8:5-7 from the Greek Septuagint Bible that proclaims the dignity of human nature:

*What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the Son of Man that you should care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor, and put all things under his feet (Heb.2:6-8).*

The Hebrew version of this Psalm speaks of man being made a little lower than God (*Elohim*) making no mention of angels. This Psalm probably echoes the thoughts expressed in Genesis, where man is described as being made in the image and likeness of God, and to whom God has given dominion of the earth. Our author indicates that man’s dominion is not limited to this earth alone but extends also to the world that is to come: *“In subjecting all things to him, God left nothing unsubjected” (Heb. 2:8)*. There is an implication that man in the world to come will be superior to angels. Paul expresses this same thought when he says to the Corinthians: *“Do you not know that we are to judge angels?” (1Cor.6:3)*. In the light of man’s ideal nature and position, our author seems to imply fitness in God’s Son becoming man. Yet in the light of man’s humiliating situation, it was a humiliating experience for the Son of God to assume a condition *“for a little while lower than the angels.”*

The author observes: *“At present we do not see all things thus subject”* to man. Man’s ideal destiny has been frustrated and unfulfilled. Scripture teaches that man separated himself from God by willful sin. He did this because he was tempted by Satan. Through temptation, Satan overcame man. At man’s fall, Satan assumed dominion of the world, and became “god of this present age.” The evils of this present age culminate in physical death from this dominion. *“By the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it” (Wis.2:24)*. *“The sting of death is sin” (1Cor.15:56)*.



When the Son of God entered humanity into this fallen condition and assumed the burden of sin, He came under a certain dominion of Satan which opened Him to suffering and death.

Our author points out the ideal human situation and the present human situation, which remains far from its ideal. He immediately follows this observation by teaching that Jesus Christ has achieved our ideal condition; the promise to man has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. However, the revelation of its complete fulfillment and man's experience of it must await the Second Coming.

The author uses, for the first time, the name of the Incarnate Son of God when he tells his readers, "*But we do not see Jesus crowned with glory and honor...*" The name of "Jesus" is used by the writer to express the Incarnation of the Son. This reference to Jesus in glory implies that at His entrance into glory, the Son did not discard His humanity. The human hope and dream has been realized in Jesus Christ. Our author immediately adds why: "*...because he suffered death*" (Heb.2:9a). He implies that a vital relationship exists between the sufferings of this life and eternal glory in heaven.

The exaltation of Christ flows from the fact that He endured death, the ultimate and most bitter effects of sin. Hebrews implies God's Son became man so that He could die. Man's lost status, because of sin, could only be regained through sacrifice. Our writer expresses these truths when he writes, "*Jesus, who was made 'for a little while lower than the angels' [through the Incarnation], that through God's gracious will he might taste death for the sake of all men*" (Heb.2:9b).

Our author maintains the Incarnation and the Redemption through the death of Jesus occurred because of God's love for fallen man. Sin alienated man from God. It did not alienate God from man. Man needed to be reconciled to God. God achieved man's reconciliation Himself by becoming man in order to die for mankind. "*God so loved the world!*"

Our author desires to stress that it was not death itself, but the manner of death, that achieved salvation. It involved a suffering death. The expression, "he might taste death," includes not only the act of dying, but the most bitter experience of death. It has been pointed out that man, because of sin, is incapable of truly experiencing the full pain and horror of death--only the sinless Christ tasted the full bitterness of death because of His fullness of life.

When our writer says He endured this “for the sake of all men,” the expression signifies not only *all* but emphasizes *for each one* he tasted and suffered death.

## THE PIONEER OF SALVATION

Suffering is a universal experience of mankind. Few things people dread more than suffering. It has been a constant cause of scandal for man, a source of temptation and alienation from God. In some sufferings, even though distasteful, man can see value--growth and great achievements are often at the price of certain sufferings--but there are sufferings that appear to achieve no good and seem purely evil. In the face of such sufferings, men are tempted to doubt the goodness of God, the existence of God. Christ's death on the Cross appeared to be such a suffering. It confounded His disciples while it gave solace to His enemies~ it afforded them their biblical proof that Jesus was a sinner--a blasphemer. Our author directly faces the suffering of Christ, which he attributes to the will of God. He maintains it was the most “fitting” and proper means by which God could bring Christ to perfection. He writes:

*Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory, God, for whom and through whom all things exist, should make their leader [their pioneer] in the work of salvation perfect through suffering (Heb.2:10).*

The salvation of mankind is attributed to God. Jesus is spoken of as being the *archegos* in the work of salvation. It may be translated “leader,” but not in the sense of Buddha, who is said to have personally achieved salvation; it is taught that his disciples can also achieve the same salvation by following his example. In this text, *archegos* implies Jesus to be the author and originator of “the work of salvation” through which men are saved. Many scholars believe the best translation is “pioneer.” For *archegos*, here, expresses the concept of one who first experiences and takes part in that which he establishes. His work makes it possible for others to achieve the same goal. Jesus is the Pioneer in the work of salvation. He brings many “sons” of God to glory--to union with God.

Since God, as man, Willed to achieve “the work of salvation,” it was “fitting” that the work be achieved within the human condition. To be in the human condition means to suffer and die. When God Willed to become man, He had to will to suffer and die, because these are two of the essential elements of

human existence in its present condition. Therefore, God Willed to achieve the work of salvation through suffering and death.

The Old Testament demands that the “sin offering”--the victim to be sacrificed for the sins of the people--must be perfect, without blemish. God Willed for “the pioneer in the work of salvation” to be perfected through suffering. This does not imply that Christ suffered the imperfection of sin, but, rather, he had not yet come to that moral perfection that comes only through growth and maturity. We may say that a seed is a perfect seed, but a seed still lacks the perfection of its potentiality--its maturity. We know in the Semitic world, the name expresses the being of a person. In Hebrew, *Jesus* means “Yahweh is salvation.” We read in Matthew that the Christ will be called “Jesus” because he will save his people from their sins. Only when Jesus accomplished the work of salvation did He reach the perfection implied in His name. When He became “Savior,” He lived up to His Name.

To better understand the perfecting value suffering can have, let us briefly reflect on our own growth in the power of love. If everyone around us was as perfect as we desire them to be, we would be most imperfect. The heart would have no challenge or opportunity to grow. However, when you must suffer the imperfect me, that challenges your love to become more divine. Jesus teaches us to become as compassionate as His heavenly Father, (Lk.6:35) who lets the sun and rain fall on both the good and evil. Because Christians are called to be like their Father in heaven, Jesus commanded His disciples to love their enemies. You are commanded to love those who hate and persecute you. You are to love them, not only for their sakes, but for your own: “*For the measure you measure with will be measured back to you*” (Lk.6:38). When your heart stands before those who despise and reject you, who use and manipulate you, who ignore and are indifferent to you, your suffering heart is being challenged to become like the compassionate heart of Christ.

Of those days Jesus lived on earth, the Scriptures tell us, “*Jesus, for his part, progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and man*” (Lk.2:52). What more than the last days of His life challenged His faith, hope and, charity? He who all His days did the Will of His Father was to see His life end, not in a messianic triumph, but as a criminal cursed of man and God. He knew the Scriptures and its verdict on men who die as He was dying. In the dark night of hatred that encircled and encased Him, there was no presence or experience of God. He was lonely, abandoned, and afflicted with horrible pain of body, soul, and spirit. The words of His enemies resounded in His soul:

*“He relied on God, let God rescue him now if he wants to. After all, he claimed, ‘I am God’s Son’” (Mt.27:43).*

Faith, Hope and Love reached perfection in the human heart when that tormented, exhausted, suffering Jesus, in child-like trust, said: *“Father! Into your hands I commend my spirit,”* and bowed His head and died. Such love could never die, nor the spirit that possessed it, and so the author of Hebrews wrote that *“It was fitting that...God should make their pioneer in the work of salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb.2:10).*

Christ reached personal moral perfection through the manner in which He suffered and died. Within these experiences His faith, hope, and charity reached their perfection. At His resurrection He entered into the fullness of His power, for He had overcome death itself.

In the study of Philosophy, we are taught that the actions of a being are attributed to the person who acts. A person is an intelligent being who possesses free will. A person may be divine, angelic, or human depending upon the nature of the being. The nature of the person makes the specific difference. A person acts through its nature. The actions of a being are limited by the nature of the being. In the Incarnation, the Second Person of God--who possessed the divine nature from all eternity, and through whom the operations of that nature created the universe--took upon Himself, in time, a human nature. In that human nature He suffered and died, and through that human nature redeemed mankind. Rightly it is said that, as human beings suffer, so God has suffered. It is the person who suffers.

God, in His assumed humanity, has experienced the death all human beings must experience. God did not remain outside of the human condition. He entered fully into it, and shared its good and evil. Because of the sinlessness of that assumed nature, many believe that he experienced suffering and pain to a degree of intensity never experienced in human nature that is dulled and blunted by sin. And so it has been said, “Yes, there is suffering in this world, and no one has suffered in this world more than God.” Our author wants his readers to know that they will attain to man’s lost glory, but only because Jesus won it for them by His sufferings and death.

## THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

Our author draws the attention of his readers to the personal results flowing from the work of salvation—Christ’s suffering and death. He certainly desires to make it clear that Christ died to save all men, but the effects of the redemption are enjoyed only by those who remain faithful to Christ. There has been no universal response to the Gospel. The author already indicates this when he mentions that “many sons” are brought to glory. He goes on to write: *“He who consecrates and those who are consecrated have one and the same Father” (Heb.2:11a).*

Christ, who has perfected Himself through suffering, perfects His disciples. Christ “consecrates” Christians. This implies He withdraws them from the world of sin, darkness, and Satan (see Acts 26:18). He purifies them of sin and sets them apart from this “evil and faithless age” for the service and worship of God. This consecration establishes a unique bond between Christ and Christians. It establishes such a unity and affinity that Christians are acknowledged as the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ; they can claim the title “sons of God” for they are of the family and household of God. Our author writes that even though Christians are still in their imperfect state,

*...he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will announce your name to my brothers, I will sing your praise in the midst of the assembly” and, “I will put my trust in him” and again, “Here am I, and the children God has given me!” (Heb.2:11-13).*

Three Old Testament texts are cited to illustrate the union that exists between Christ and those who believe in Him. The first quotation from Psalm 22:23 may well express the belief the Christian Community held of Christ’s presence at the time of Christian worship. It demonstrates Jesus’ kinship with the Christian Community. The second and third quotation come from Isaiah 8:17-18: *“I will put my trust in him”* may be cited to encourage the Community to have that same faith and confidence possessed by Jesus. The third quotation could imply that the children of God have been placed in the care of Jesus. There is no other reference in the New Testament that speaks of Christians as being the children of Jesus. However, the author could be implying this, since he established the Son as Creator of the Universe. As the creating Son we could be His children; as the Man Jesus, we are His brethren.

The author emphasizes that in this kinship of Jesus with the Christian Community, the Son of God completely assumes the human nature: *“Now, since the children are men of blood and flesh, Jesus likewise had a full share in ours” (Heb.2:14a)*. Jesus’ complete identity with mankind is achieved by His voluntary assumption of the human nature in its fallen condition. “Flesh and blood” is a semitic expression for humanity. Reversing the order, by placing blood first, may be intended to emphasize the importance blood will play in the salvation of mankind.

Our author implies that in this present condition, Satan the prince of death holds power over man, and man lives in constant fear of death. Death implies and symbolizes the dominion of the devil. The author says of Jesus, *“...that by his death he might rob the devil, the prince of death, of his power, and free those who through fear of death had been slaves their whole life long” (Heb.3:14b-15)*. It is not the fact of death that causes fear as much as the thought of what follows death. At Paul's conversion Jesus told him He was sending him *“to open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you, to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18a)*.

Here the purpose of the Incarnation is to destroy the dominion of Satan over mankind and to bring liberty to the captives. Satan exercised his dominion over Christ through inflicting suffering and death upon Him. Jesus, by His Resurrection from the dead, demonstrated His conquest of Satan and the destruction of his dominion and power.

We read in 2nd Timothy 1:10b, *“He has robbed death of its power and has brought life and immortality into clear light through the gospel.”* Jesus frees His disciples in this present condition, not from the experience of death, but from the fear of death. They are assured of “life and immortality.” For this reason He urged them not to fear those people, or those things for that matter, that could only destroy one’s physical life. The Scriptures teach the *“last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1Cor.15:26)*. Revelation teaches that Satan’s power will be completely annihilated only at the end of the world. This implies that sin and Satan still exert their power in this world until then.

The writer emphasizes that the Son of God became man in order to help men, not angels. We do not have to be angels to be helped by Him. If He had desired to help angels, He would have become an angel. He writes: *“Surely he did not come to help angels, but rather the children of Abraham” (Heb.2:16)*. The children of Abraham are those men and women who live by faith; who

answer, as did Abraham, the call of faith; who are the spiritual children of Abraham rather than those who spring from the natural seed of Abraham.

### MERCIFUL AND FAITHFUL HIGH PRIEST

The writer goes from this point to emphasize the extent of the Incarnation: *“Therefore he had to become like his brothers in every way.”* Christ desired complete identity with the children of men, so that he might share in every way the complete human life experienced by every human being. His identification with humanity is absolute. St. Gregory of Nazianzas wrote, *“What is not assumed, is not healed.”* This experience, our author maintains, qualified Jesus Christ to become a *“merciful and faithful high priest before God on their behalf, to expiate the sins of the people” (Heb.2:17b).*

This is the first mention of Jesus as high priest. It is the essential theme to be taught and developed in the Epistle. This is the only New Testament work that gives this title to Jesus. It teaches that Jesus is not only our Redeemer, but He is our Mediator before God.

Our author immediately indicates the uniqueness of Jesus, the high priest, when he describes Him as merciful or compassionate. This quality is ascribed to no high priest in the Old Testament. Philo contended that the high priest should demonstrate no human emotion--should not express grief even at the death of a family member. Our author presents a different opinion of the perfect high priest. Such a quality would be based upon the author's own knowledge of Jesus Christ, who encouraged His disciples to be compassionate and merciful as their heavenly Father. Their compassion would demonstrate them to be children of their heavenly Father.

This mercy of Jesus implies He considers the circumstance and the situation of each sinful person. As the faithful high priest He can be trusted in His office of high priest--an office that pertains to all men's relations towards God. In this office of high priest, Jesus Christ expiates the sins of the people. The word *“expiates”* implies that Jesus makes amends for the sins of the people. The verb expresses the idea of the removal of sin or any defilement.

In the Old Testament this was done by God or by His priest through the means decreed by God. On the Day of Atonement the Jewish high priest, through a prescribed ritual, expiated the sins of the Jewish nation and thereby purified the people, the country and the temple. There was a belief among the

rabbis that Satan stood daily before the throne of God and accused the people of God of sin~ every day of the year except the Day of Atonement. As one person observed, the reason for this might be that on that day, the Jewish people accuse themselves of sin. When our author wrote of “the sins of the people” he used the word *laos*, translated “People.” The word laity is derived from the word *laos*. In the New Testament, *laos* is used to signify “the people of God”--the members of the Church.

Our author desires to make clear to his readers how intimately Jesus Christ relates to each of them; how He is concerned about what they suffer; how they not only possess His deepest sympathy, but in their weakness He will share His own strength with them. They must not picture Him as some critical judge, ready to condemn them, or as some super-spiritual being too superior and removed from the human situation to be concerned. No! He knows the human situation with all its dangers, temptations, and hopes, for he shared completely in these things. He personally experienced those sufferings caused by human weakness, such as fear, grief, loneliness, alienations, hatred, betrayal, and physical pain. He experienced each of these. None of them left Him unmoved. Because of His own experience, He has sympathy for all the sufferings of human beings.

It is into the dimension of human suffering that Jesus enters deepest in order to know the pain that flows from sin in this world. He died that He would know this most dreaded of man’s earthly experience. Though He experienced all these things, he experienced them as a human being, with the natural reaction, attraction, and repulsion of a human being. And so our author writes: “*Since he was himself tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tempted*” (Heb.2:18).

To his readers, the author says that Jesus not only suffered *for* you but He suffered *like* you. He underwent the same temptations to faith and obedience to God’s Will as you do. God Willed that Jesus should die. Jesus possessed the natural, lawful desire for self-preservation that led him to desire to avoid death and its sufferings. However, this wish--good in itself--opposed God’s revealed will for Him. This good desire became a temptation for Him--a temptation He resisted with all His strength. Once, when He spoke of His coming death, He shocked St. Peter who took Him to one side and said, “*God forbid! This will never happen to you.*” Peter tempted Jesus to avoid this death. Jesus reacted immediately--He pushed Peter away with the words, “*Get behind me Satan--you are a scandal to me.*”



When the hour finally arrived, He prayed to be freed from this heavy burden. When he faced death, His fear, His loneliness, and sense of abandonment became so acute He sweat drops of blood. It is not those who give into temptation that know the full power of temptation and its sufferings, but those who endure temptation to the end. Jesus bore the full power of temptation and He was not overcome. Our author tells us now, *“He is able to help those who are tempted.”* He possesses the strength to stand by us in times of temptation--not only to sympathize with us, but to aid us. The author tells us that in the past Jesus expiated our sins, but now in the present He helps us in our afflictions.

An episode from the life of St. Oliver Plunkett demonstrates well this lesson. For his Catholic Faith, Oliver Plunkett was condemned to death with this sentence:

*You shall be drawn through the city of London to Tyburn; there you shall be hanged by the neck but cut down before you are dead, your bowels shall be taken out and burnt before your face, your head shall be cut off, and your body divided into four quarters, to be disposed of as his majesty pleases. And I pray God to have mercy upon your soul.*

While awaiting execution Oliver wrote these words to a relative:

*Sentence of death passed against me on 15th without causing me fear or depriving me of sleep for a quarter of an hour... I will teach others with grace of God, by example, not to fear death. But how am I, a poor creature, so strong, seeing my Redeemer began to fear, to be weary and sad, and that drops of his blood ran down to the ground? I have considered that Christ by his fears and passions, merited for me to be without fear...*

The author of Hebrews knows that being a Christian is a heavenly call. It is a divine vocation. “You have not chosen me; I have chosen you.” Being a Christian is God’s expressed will for us. God has appointed us to be Christians in this world. Our author now calls upon his readers whom he calls “holy brothers” to contemplate—“to fix” their eyes on Jesus in order to discover the fidelity demanded by such a vocation. He will forcefully teach them, and not without a bit of fire and brimstone, that their faithfulness to Christ must be as strong at the end of their lives as in the days of first fervor.

These Christians faced a temptation to give up their Christian commitment. Regardless of the temptation to seek salvation in some way, they must remain faithful to Christ. He has made it clear that Jesus Christ knows the test of being faithful to God's Will in this world. He knows it from inside out, through personal experience. He is a merciful and faithful high priest who will aid us in all that pertains to our salvation and union with God.

### THE FIDELITY OF CHRIST

The writer emphasizes the fidelity of Jesus to His vocation in order to encourage the fidelity of his readers. He writes:

*Therefore, holy brothers who share in a heavenly calling, fix your eyes on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we acknowledge in faith, who was faithful to him who appointed him (Heb.3:1).*

When he writes "fix your eyes on Jesus," he wants his readers to seriously contemplate the humanity of Jesus Christ and his kinship with them. He uses two unique terms to describe Jesus: apostle and high priest. The Greek word *apostolos* means one who is sent as an ambassador or envoy of another. The Son of God became man because the Father sent him into the world as His Ambassador. The Hebrew word *shaliach* also means one who is sent. The Rabbis spoke of a priest as being the shaliach of God, and they referred to the high priest on the Day of Atonement as the shaliach of the people. He was their representative before God to offer sacrifice for their sins. Calling Jesus "high priest" is intended to call to mind the sacrifice of His own life for the sins of the people. When the author invites his readers to contemplate Jesus as apostle and high priest, he is bringing before their eyes the entire life of Jesus—from the Alpha to the Omega. His entire life was one of self-surrender and oblation, and this vocation of His did not end until His death.

As mentioned earlier, our author saw in the Old Testament the shadows of the things to come. He turns his attention to Moses, for in Moses he beheld a reflection of Christ. Also in Moses' relationship with Israel he saw a reflection of Christ's relationship to the Church. Moses was considered within Jewish theology as the greatest person who lived on earth for he spoke face to face with God. Certain teachers even maintained he was greater than the angels. Because of the Jewish influence on the Church it would be a most logical step for our author to establish the superiority of Jesus over Moses, since he had so clearly established the humanity of Jesus. The author proves Jesus'

superiority over Moses by objectively presenting their respective positions in religious history. Moses appeared as a servant in the household of God. He proved faithful in his arduous task. However, the Son is the founder of the household, and He appears within the household as Son, not servant. The author concludes Jesus to be greater than Moses because the founder of the household is greater than the members of the household. He writes:

*Moses, too, “was faithful in all God’s household,” but Jesus is more worthy of honor than he, as the founder of a house is more honorable than the house itself. Every house is founded by someone, but God is the founder of all. Moses “was faithful in all God’s household” as a servant charged with the task of witnessing to what would be spoken; but Christ was faithful as the Son placed over God’s house (Heb.3:2b-6a).*

The author sees the Christian Community as Christ’s Family on this earth. Its members form a holy brotherhood whose unity comes, not from flesh and blood, but from their mutual faith in Jesus Christ and the divine vocation shared by them in this world. He beheld Jesus, not as present in the members of the Church as did Paul, but rather here and now with the members of the household. He teaches that, in order for a Christian to maintain this close association with Christ, and to keep his or her membership within the household, he or she must bravely confess faith in Christ, and live a life of hope that expresses confidence in God’s purposes and reliance upon His promises. No member is assured a permanent position in this family unless he or she remains faithful. And so he writes: *“It is we who are that house if we hold fast to our confidence and the hope of which we boast” (Heb.3:6b).*

Moses’ fidelity recalls to the author the infidelity of many members of God’s household, and the evil consequences of their infidelity. He saw a comparison between the people being led through the desert by Moses and the Christian people being led through this life by Christ. He will fix the eyes not only on Jesus Christ, but also on what will be the consequence if they turn from their Christian Vocation. He calls to mind the words of Psalm 95, which refers to Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness of Sin when God put them to the test. He holds that the Holy Spirit, at this moment, personally addresses these words of Psalm 95 to the Christian Community. The position of “today” in the recitation stresses urgency. We read:

*Wherefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you should hear his*

*voice, harden not your hearts as at the revolt in the day of testing in the desert, when your fathers tested and tried me, and saw my works for forty years. Because of this I was angered with that generation and I said, 'They have always been of erring heart, and have never known my ways.' Thus I swore in my anger, 'They shall never enter into my rest'" (Heb.3:7-11).*

The sins of Israel are not attributed to a lack of knowledge, but to their willfulness. Ignorance of God implies disobedience, for one only “knows” (experiences) God’s way through obedience. Along with Rabbi Akiba, the writer interprets the phrase “They shall never enter into my rest” to mean that the whole generation of Israelites would be excluded from the world to come. He desires to express the idea that the entire forty years in the desert was a time of temptation, in which the Israelites provoked and exasperated God in the face of all God’s warnings to them. They possessed a critical attitude toward God, expressed by discontent and defiance of His Will. They were excluded from God’s rest because of their continuing obstinacy. They died in the desert because they refused to follow the path of life: *“They have always been erring of heart.”*

After placing the example of Israel’s infidelity and its consequences before the readers, the author now encourages them to fix their eyes upon their own hearts. He implies that the Holy Spirit now speaks within those hearts since they are members of God’s household. The Son, Jesus Christ, is the Head (Lord) of this household, and if his readers desire to remain in the Family of God they must have that trust and confidence that surrenders their lives and destinies into His hands. As He directs, they must go. The author demands absolute fidelity to Jesus, expressed in total obedience. He writes: *“Take care, my brothers, lest any of you have an evil and unfaithful spirit and fall away from the living God” (Heb.3:12).*

The Greek construction, here, stresses the dangerous situation now present within their lives, and it carries the sense of urgency that something must be done today. This evil condition is one that issues forth in inaction. They must not assume their past commitment to Christ guarantees today or tomorrow. If they do not take active care and concern after a time of faith, a time of disbelief may come. The words “any of you” expresses the author’s personal concern for the individual spiritual condition of each member of the Community. He knows the infidelity of one member of the household can corrupt the faith of the entire Community.

The author is very consciously aware of the importance of the Christian Community in the life of the individual members. He knows the importance of Christian worship and fellowship. He now encourages the individual members to be a daily source of encouragement and strength to each other, day-by-day, to help and exhort each other. He tells them, *“Encourage one another daily while it is still -today, so that no one grows hardened by the deceit of sin” (Heb.3:13).*

The author pictures sin as an active, aggressive power that must be directly and intentionally counter-acted, or it will spread like a cancer within the spirit and within the community. The sin he sees is apostasy. It is an evil that bit-by-bit enters the spirit, and imperceptibly turns the will from Christ, until finally the will finds itself hardened toward God’s Will. These Christians were in danger of embracing erroneous ideas about salvation, and embarking upon dangerous paths leading away from the living God. He does not see a weekly worship service as sufficient to protect the spirit from the sin of infidelity.

He warns his readers that they will not end up as members of God’s Family if they do not maintain that same spirit of faith and hope at the end of their lives with which they began their Christian commitment. Christian worship and fellowship are an indispensable means to this end. He tells his readers: *“We have become partners of Christ only if we maintain to the end that confidence with which we began” (Heb.3:14).*

The author senses in his readers a sense of false security that rested upon their past religious experiences. He seeks to destroy this dangerous complacency. He asks them to consider who were those men and women who incurred God’s displeasure in the desert, and were excluded from eternal rest. They were men and women who had been delivered from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, who had at one time in joyful faith followed Moses. However, when God permitted them to be tested, they rebelled, disobeyed, and came to disbelief. Men and women, 600,000 of them, who had once entered upon the way to the Promised Land, came to death in the desert because of disbelief. The author said to his readers:

*When Scripture says, “Today, if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts as at the revolt,” who were those that revolted when they heard that voice? Was it not all whom Moses had led out of Egypt? With whom was God angry for forty years? Was it not those who had sinned, whose corpses fell in the desert? To whom but to*

*the disobedient did he swear that they would not enter into his rest? We see, moreover, that it was their unbelief that kept them from entering (Heb.3:15-19).*

The author sees that this, too, may be but a terrible shadow of things to come within the Christian Community. -Because this is a possibility, our author previously wrote: *“For if the word spoken through angels stood unchanged, and all transgression and disobedience received its due punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as ours?” (Heb.2:2-3).*

And so he says to all of us: *“Today if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts!” (Ps.95:8).*

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CONSEQUENCE OF DISOBEDIENCE

#### INTRODUCTION

The author of Hebrews writes from a three dimensional point of view. He views the past and sees the future; he looks at the present and sees both past and future. He has the past before his eyes in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. In these recorded events he sees the foreshadowing and the prefiguring of the future. In the present he sees both a representation of the past and future. As we study this Epistle we need to keep in mind the influence of Plato's conceptions of reality upon the mind of its author. The author believed in the heavenly realm where perfect reality existed and in the earthly realm where imperfect reflections of the heavenly realm existed.

In Jesus Christ this heavenly and perfect realm made a break into this world. The author teaches this when he tells his readers that the pre-existing Son of God became man. Jesus Christ is not a shadow of perfection. However, since this perfect Person had to manifest Himself through imperfect human nature, He did not manifest the fullness of perfection while on earth. Only when this nature had been perfected in suffering and death and had assumed a position at the right hand of God did Jesus Christ perfectly reflect the fullness of man's glory. Through the eyes of faith, Christians can now behold this Perfect Person in glory. In this vision Christians behold a reflection of their own future glory.

The life and teachings of Jesus clearly mark the way for Christians to enter into the glory God willed for them and called them to achieve. The Christian pilgrimage is not an aimless wandering in the desert like the Israelites of old. Jesus Christ, the Pioneer of the work of salvation, has mapped a route that sets Christians on a direct and well-marked road to salvation. Jesus said on the last night before His death:

*"You know the way that leads where I go." "Lord," said Thomas, "We do not know where you are going. How can we know the*

*way?” Jesus told him: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me” (Jn.14:4-6).*

Because the author of Hebrews firmly believed this, and because he detected a falling away from this belief among certain members of the Christian Community, he wrote his Epistle to these Christians. He is more than a teacher of truth; he is a pastoral teacher. His is no pure academic appreciation and explanation of divine truth, but rather it is a presentation by a disciple of Jesus Christ whose loving care and concern for the spiritual welfare of other members of the Church urged him to enlighten, encourage, admonish and correct them. For this reason we find, woven within the fabric of his entire work, beautiful theological observations along with personal warnings and admonitions.

He fixed his readers eyes upon the “lost” generation of Israelites who, under the leadership of Moses, left Egypt and slavery for the Promised Land in joyful faith. However, when the Israelites reached the Promised Land, they refused to enter it. Twelve scouts were sent to reconnoiter the land. Then ten brought back reports that filled the people with terror. They measured and weighed the findings on the natural scale of evaluation. Eyes without faith in God examined the difficulties and obstacles of entering and taking possession of land promised, and it filled their hearts with fear. They refused to go forward. *“Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt (Nm.14:4b)”* was their decision. However, the other two scouts, Joshua and Caleb, were men with faith in God. They did not underestimate the difficulties that lay ahead, but they viewed them with the eyes of faith and their hearts were filled with courage. They said to the people: *“...the Lord is with us. Therefore, do not be afraid of them.’ In answer, the whole community threatened to stone them” (Nm.14:9c-10).*

That day in the desert demonstrated a lost faith in Yahweh manifested in a direct defiance of His command. Yahweh summed up their previous behavior in these words: *“...all the men who have seen my glory and the signs I worked in Egypt and in the desert, and who nevertheless have put me to the test ten times already and have failed to heed my voice” (Nm.14:22).*

Their previous behavior resulted in their present disbelief and defiance. Such behavior merited from Yahweh this sentence of punishment:

*...not one shall see the land which I promised on oath to their*



*fathers. None of these who have spurned me shall see it...your bodies shall fall here in the desert, here where your children must*

*wander for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, till the last of you lies dead in the desert (Nm.14:23,32-33).*

So began their forty years of wandering in the desert. This punishment they inflicted not only upon themselves, but on the innocent as well--their children, Joshua and Caleb. The only difference being that in the end the innocent and faithful entered the Promised Land. Children do indeed bear the sins of their parents!

Within this historical lesson our author beheld a possible foreshadowing of the life of some present day Christians. If they came to the same spiritual condition in their journey of faith, they would suffer a like fate. To impede such a disastrous ending the author urges them, while the time remains, to be faithful to their Christian Vocation--to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit TODAY!

There was a lady from Alabama who possessed a powerful talent with the written word, also a penetrating insight into human nature along with a great sense of moral values. She had the mind and means to be a great writer. Those who recognized this talent continually urged her to write. In the summer of her fifty-third year she entered college preparing for her writing career. She wrote a friend, "The next move is up to Him (the Lord)!" A few weeks later she died in a fatal automobile accident. All the opportunities to use and mature her great gift had now passed. Had she waited too long to write? At her death, not only a great and gentle lady, but a grand and unused talent died. There is a time of life. There is a purpose of life. If we are not careful, the time may run out before the purpose is fulfilled.

The author of Hebrews knew Christians possessed a grand and great gift of faith in Jesus Christ. That gift must not be neglected or its use postponed--it too could be lost. With the loss of faith goes the opportunity for eternal salvation. In order to stress the urgent necessity for Preservation of the Faith the writer, within a few verses, quotes three times from Psalm 95: "*Today, if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*" He desires his readers to grasp the vital connection between faith and obedience and infidelity and disobedience. He wrote: "*O whom but the disobedient did he swear that they would not enter into his rest? We see, moreover, that it was their unbelief that*

*kept them from entering” (Heb.3:18-19).* He rightly sees a correlation between disobedience and unbelief.

## BIBLICAL FAITH

Let us review the concept of biblical faith in order to see clearly the relationship between disobedience and disbelief, and to better understand the author’s exhortations. Later he himself defines faith as *“confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see” (11:1).* He presents a psychological definition of faith as it describes the effects of faith in a person.

Faith gives a person’s spirit assurance and conviction about matters beyond present sense experience. In western man, faith has become purely an intellectual act of assenting to the truths of revelation. Biblical Faith touches the entire personality. It centers not so much on what is believed but rather in whom we believe. By following God’s Will, a person experiences God to be secure and firm--to be a reliable and faithful Person. God keeps His word, and experience shows He can be trusted to do so. A person acknowledges God’s fidelity by putting faith in God. Biblical Faith primarily expresses itself by trusting God--by entrusting one’s life to God. The Scriptures often speak of God as “Rock.” It finds perfect expression in Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken and mountains quake at its surging. The Lord of hosts is with us~ our stronghold is the God of Jacob (Ps.46:1-4).*

Our author frequently quotes Psalm 95. In the prelude to the words quoted, we find a lovely hymn to faith and obedience:

*Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation... Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the Lord who made us. For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, and the flock he guides (Ps.95:1,6-7).*

As biblical faith incarnates itself in the heart of a person, it moves the person to listen to the Word of God, hearken to the Voice of the Holy Spirit, and to accomplish the Will of God. As the Will of God expresses the very heart and essence of God, the believer, by accomplishing that Will, moves more and

more into the very being and life of God. As the spirit experiences accomplishing the Will of God through obedience, the Presence of God becomes more evident and discernible within the life of the believer. This evident Presence sparks greater assurance and conviction, which in turn stimulate a

greater zeal to do the Will of God. It is because obedience brings one into the Life and Presence of God that obedience increases faith and love of God.

Faith will always involve traveling in the dark. Faith is blind. It consists in trusting the light, the love, the vision of another. Where faith is lacking, or deficient, the Will of God causes fear, anxiety, questioning, reluctance and rebellion. As the spirit withdraws from the Will of God, it slowly abandons the Life and Presence of God until it finds itself in a spiritual desert wherein there is no sense of God's Presence. The spirit faces the evil experiences of life without any awareness of God and ultimately without any faith in God. Such a condition results from disobedience, from man's withdrawing his will from the Will of God. St. Stephen expresses much the same thoughts in Acts when he says: *"But God turned away from them and abandoned them to the worship of the galaxies in the heavens"* (Acts 7:42). Faith leads to obedience and obedience increases faith. Infidelity leads to disobedience and disobedience to disbelief. The author of Hebrews has emphasized that the cause of the Israelites' failure to enter into the "rest" of God as being due to their disobedience, which led to "their unbelief."

### THE SABBATH REST

The author develops the theme of entering into God's rest. He foresees the possibility that his reader could conclude that it was now no longer possible to enter into the rest mentioned in the Psalm because it applied to Israel's entrance into Canaan. Therefore the promise had been fulfilled and is no longer applicable to people today. The author first presumes this promise still holds. He sustains his presumption by insisting that it is not only possible to enter into God's rest, but Christians are even now entering into God's rest. He insists that Israel's entrance into Canaan was not the fulfillment of the promise at all. Israel's entrance into the Promised Land was but a foreshadowing and prefiguring of that real entrance into God's rest that still remains possible. He calls it the sabbath rest which he saw symbolized by Israel's Sabbath observance. Therefore the author can write:

*Therefore, while the promise of entrance into his rest still holds, we ought to be fearful of disobeying lest anyone of you be judged to have lost his chance of entering (Heb.4:1).*

The fear (*phobeisthai*) mentioned called for that healthy fear such as possessed by a runner in a race who fears he may lose the race because of his complacency and failure to exert himself to the maximum. If such a runner loses the race, it could be judged that he lacked the heart to win. He didn't really *will* to win. This may be the implied meaning of the phrase "you be judged to have lost your chance of entering." In other words, you really did not will to enter into God's rest. The writer encourages his readers not to be spiritually complacent but to maintain a healthy mistrust of self. Sin is deceitful, and "an evil and unfaithful spirit" may unconsciously be developing within one's spirit. Its presence in the soul produces the evil fruit of disobedience. The writer goes on to observe how it is not enough to hear the word. Along with St. James, he insists that Christians must be doers of the word.

*"We have indeed heard the good news (gospel), as they did. But the word which they heard did not profit them, for they did not receive it in faith" (Heb.4:2).* In other words, they did not act upon it but reacted to it. The word of God had no power to positively influence their lives because they negated its power through unbelief. Our author does not imply the Word of God did not affect them. It did, but they resisted its power as their final judgment will manifest. The author emphasizes the path into God's rest is the path of faith; it is we who have believed who enter into that rest, just as God said: *"Thus I swore in my anger, 'They shall never enter into my rest'" (Heb.4:3a).* From the verbal construction we know the author does not imply his readers have entered into God's rest, but they are on the road that will lead into that rest.

Our author centers his attention on the meaning of God's rest. He sees it as a divine state of being since the Scripture speaks of God Himself entering into his rest. It is a state of being belonging to the world to come into which God still invites mankind to enter. The author desires the reader to understand that any state of rest in this world can but foreshadow this eternal rest. The eternal rest symbolizes mankind at peace and in complete union with God. It symbolizes the complete holiness of a person and that person's absolute and eternal consecration to God. Our author's thoughts were being inspired by the reading from Genesis:

*Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation (Gn.2:2-3).*

The Jewish Rabbis pointed out the eternity of this state since on the seventh day there was no reference to “evening came, and morning followed.” We read in Hebrews:

*...Yet God’s work was finished when he created the world, for in reference to the seventh day Scripture somewhere says [Here we see the Holy Spirit being limited by the author’s limitations--certainly the Holy Spirit knew the source of the quote!], “And God rested from all his work on the seventh day,” and again, in the place we have referred to, God says, “They shall never enter into my rest” (Heb.4:3b-5).*

Since this refers to the Israelites in the desert who did not enter into God’s rest, does it imply an eternal decree that forever closes to mankind an entrance into God’s rest? Our author answers, *No!*

Therefore, since it remains for some to enter, and those to whom it was first announced did not because of unbelief, God once more set a day, “today,” when long afterward he spoke through David the words we have quoted: *“Today, if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Heb.4:6-7).* The point being that David lived hundreds of years after the rebellion in the desert and therefore the words of Psalm 95, attributed to David, reveal the invitation still remains open to those who wish and will to accept it.

When Joshua led Israel into Canaan, the Israelites entered into a possession filled with riches for which they had not had to labor--they were gifts to be received and enjoyed. Therefore, in the mind of the author they symbolized here on earth the “rest” of God, which could never be here on earth. Furthermore the spirituality of this rest of God is implied by making the Sabbath observance a symbol of God’s rest. The Sabbath rest was holy (see Ex.31:14); it was a means to make Israel holy.

When establishing the sacredness of the Sabbath, Yahweh said, *“It is I the Lord who make you holy.”* The author certainly seeks to call to the mind of his

readers Jesus whom he sees being symbolized in Joshua. In the Hebrew language, Jesus and Joshua are the same. As Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, which prefigured the “rest” of God, Jesus, the perfect Joshua, leads His obedient disciples into the city of the living God where they will dwell in eternal union with God. The author goes on to say:

*Now if Joshua had led them into the place of rest, God would not have spoken afterwards of another day. Therefore, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God. And he who enters into God’s rest, rests from his own work as God did from his (Heb.4:8-10).*

The author subtly implies two things: first, by the verb construction, he tells his readers they have not yet entered into God’s rest. Second, he implies that since God Himself did not enter into His own rest until His work on earth was completed, Christians cannot expect to enter into their rest until their work on earth is completed. Christ Himself could not enter into His rest until He completed His redemptive work. In one way we can say the work of redemption has been completed since the full effects of the redemption flow from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, since the effects of the redemption remain yet to be fully applied to creation, we can say the redemptive work remains unfinished. Work remains yet to be done. As Paul wrote the Romans:

*The world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now. Not only that, but we ourselves, although we have the Spirit as first fruits, groan inwardly while we await the redemption of our bodies (Rom.8:21-23).*

The next question naturally is who will do this work? Of course, it is primarily Jesus and His Holy Spirit. But what means will they use? Who will be their instruments? The Gospel of John suggested a new Genesis began when the Resurrected Jesus Christ appeared before His apostles and breathed upon them and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men’s sins they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound*” (Jn.20:22-23).

Here Jesus gave the power to the apostles to remove the obstacle to holiness-- the sins of men. It also teaches this gift would depend upon the apostles’ getting out and exercising their power. Therefore, Jesus commanded them:

*“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them... Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you” (Mt.28:19).*

Paul’s vocation was described by Jesus in these words:

*...to open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you, to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God; that through their faith in me they may obtain the forgiveness of their sins and a portion among God’s people (Acts 26:18).*

We read in Luke that Jesus appointed seventy-two disciples and said to them: *“The harvest is rich but the workers are few; therefore, ask the harvest master to send workers to his harvest. Be on your way, and remember: I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Lk.10:2-3).*

By now you may have guessed who are the instruments through whom Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit will complete the work of Redemption. The Christian Community! Presently that includes you and me! The Scriptures imply we certainly cannot expect to enter into God’s rest until the work is completed. St. Therese of Lisieux had an interesting insight into this. Since all things are not yet subjected to Christ, she died with the conscious awareness that work, not rest, awaited her in eternity: “My work is just beginning,” she said, “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth.” She continues working for the Coming of the Kingdom.

As is his custom, the author now exhorts his readers: *“Let us strive to enter into that rest, so that no one may fall in imitation of the example of Israel’s unbelief” (Heb.4:11).* Again he has the individual in mind, and the effect that bad example can exert on members of the Community. He warns them to be cautious about following the bad example of others. He does not warn about falling into disobedience, but against falling into disbelief through disobedience. He has made it clear that the “rest” of God follows upon the completion of the work one does out of obedience to God’s Will. This work may not be done because we follow the bad example of others. To follow bad example may be internally motivated by one’s personal indifference, sloth, selfishness. In the end it all amounts to infidelity to God’s Will.

When it is realized that the Popes of the past and the present have called the Christian People to evangelize the world, and the Bishops in joint session and

individually have commissioned the laity to evangelize, the meager response on the part of so many may indicate how widespread the spirit of disobedience and disbelief is within the present Catholic Community. Such a spirit does not demonstrate the eagerness needed in order to enter into God's rest.

## THE WORD OF GOD

Our writer began this chapter by mentioning the possibility of members of the Christian Community being judged unfit to enter into God's rest. Now he tells his readers that "the word of God" will render the Judgment. Scripturally the "word of God" could be the "Wisdom" of God expressed through God's messengers in both the New and Old Testaments. In the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, "the Word" of God becomes incarnated:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory; the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love (Jn.1:14).*

It seems more probable that for the author of Hebrews the Word of God is the divine message of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. If we go back to chapter two we see that the author spoke of "*the word spoken through angels*" which he compares to "*the salvation...announced first by the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who had heard him*" (Heb.2:2-3). We probably would not be wrong to consider the "word of God" here in Hebrews to be synonymous with the Gospel. We may say that it is the Gospel that causes judgment, and it is the Lord who clarifies and ratifies that judgment. We read in the Gospel of John:

*Whoever believes in him avoids condemnation, but whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of God's only Son. The judgment of condemnation is this: the light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked" (Jn.3:18-19).*

The judgment of God will be a declaration of what we are. It has been said that we are created with a soul, but we must also create a soul within ourselves. We become what we are through the degree in which we accept or reject the Gospel, in other words, in the degree in which we accept or reject the Word and the Will of God. Our reaction to the Gospel judges us. We are what we will; we are our decisions. Did we decide for Jesus? Did we remain



uncommitted? [*“If you are not with me, you are against me!”*] Did we reject the truth of the Gospel? [*“Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed”* (Jn.3:20)].

The Word of God is not like rain falling upon a tin roof. The message once heard cannot be dismissed as so much verbal noise. It forces a decision. [Not to decide is a decision!] “Indeed,” says our author, “*God’s word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword*” (Heb.4:12a). This Divine Wisdom is much more than objective truth that presents itself before the tribunal of human reason for its acceptance or rejection. The Word of God becomes a moral force in the life of the hearer. It does not lie like fallen seed in a field. It is alive and active, and this implies the power of self-determination within itself. It moves and operates under its own steam. It knocks for entrance at the door of the spirit. It forces its acceptance or rejection to become a personal decision at a person’s deepest level. The spirit must respond either by accepting it or expelling it. Its expulsion may be rationalized away, but the decision is not solely made on the intellectual level but on a much higher one. Our author describes the power of this “living and active” Word: “*It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart*” (Heb.4:12b).

The author presents the complete portrait of man as he perceives him. His essential divisions of man are the same expressed by Paul in 1st Thessalonians (5:23): body, soul and spirit. He already spoke of man as being “*flesh and blood,*” giving reference to that element of humanity that represents his biological affinity with the entire social fabric of the human race; this establishes his unity and solidarity with all the human life that precedes it, and is its heir of good and ill--the least not being the effects of sin. The “body” is the organization of matter in which human life grows and through which it reaches its maturity. The “flesh” of man, for our author, represents man in his essential weakness and vulnerability. It expresses his kinship and affinity with the life around him.

The soul is the source of life within the being; it represents that primal energy from which human action flows, expressing itself through the sensitive and physical body--a dimension upon which it may squander the entire source of life’s energy. The soul is likewise “life” that possesses the potential to develop, ascend and reach the eternal. Jesus gave some directions as to how the soul could achieve its highest potentiality.

The spirit is that dimension of a human being that is its ground of contact with spiritual reality--its own and others. This is the meeting tent of the divine with the human, and the human with the spiritual. It is through this avenue that the supernatural personally touches and affects the human personality. Through this spiritual dimension of his personality man has some affinity with God and angels that makes personal contact and communication possible. Our writer later refers to God as "Father of spirits." He writes: *"If we respected our earthly fathers who corrected us, should we not all the more submit to the Father of spirits, and live?" (Heb.12:9).*

As Christians, the author tells us, we can draw near (communicate with): *"...the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant... (Heb.12:23-24).*

The body, the soul, the spirit are three dimensions of the human personality. Of themselves each could be judged objectively as powers of one's being which of themselves possess no moral character. The Scriptures speak of the "Heart" as the seat of moral awareness, and therefore the source of moral good and evil. Our author speaks of the *"reflections and thoughts of the heart."* It is the controlling center of the human personality. Into this center come the experiences of the body, soul and spirit. Here they are decoded, analyzed and decided upon. From here come the commands that decide personal action. Jesus taught:

*Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart: acts of fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, greed, maliciousness, deceit, sensuality, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, and obtuse spirit. All these evils come from within and render a man impure (Mk.7:21-23).*

One of Sigmund Freud's great scientific discoveries was how much of these commands and decisions are shrouded in secrecy, and even guarded from one's conscious awareness. In the inner sanctum of the human heart decisions are made for reasons and motives conscious awareness knows nothing about. It often operates under illusions and delusion. Jeremiah wrote:

*More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it? I, the Lord, alone probe the mind and test*

*the heart, to reward everyone according to his ways, according to the merit of his deeds (Jer.17:9-10).*

Our author warns that it is into this inner sanctum *“an evil and unfaithful spirit”* may enter and through the deceit of sin harden the heart toward God. The prophet Obadiah said, *“The pride of the heart has deceived you” (Ob.1:3a).*

The produce of the human heart determines the final verdict of divine judgment. For this reason the Church teaches we can never be certain of the final verdict. Salvation is not actually ours until the Lord declares it so! However, we can certainly go forth in hope--hope grounded in humility that goes before divine majesty with *“Be merciful to me O Lord, a sinner!”*

The word of God possesses the power of analysis. It is the perfect analyzer of human conduct. Its powers of analyzing are compared to the sharpest sword or scalpel that minutely separates everything, and scrutinizes each aspect, each influence, each motivation, and each intention of human behavior. In other words, the Word of God penetrates every aspect of the human personality. Ephesians speaks of the *“word of God”* as *“the sword of the Spirit” (Eph.6:17).* *“It judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart.”* It enters into the inner sanctum of the heart where even angels may not enter; it discerns whether the heart has hardened itself against God. It presses from each human act every drop of goodness and evil and carefully weighs it.

Nothing goes undetected, or unrecorded, or unaccounted for. Here it will be discerned if the person is sick of soul or evil of spirit. It does not stop at judging external acts, or at the physical or emotional influences. Feelings will have little weight in the matter. They are so easily programmed that they are not a safe gauge of evil or good. The Lord said to Samuel, *“Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart” (1Sm.16:7b).* John wrote of Jesus: *“He needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man’s heart” (Jn.2:25).*

The writer tells his readers that each one must one day see himself in the reflection of God’s own eyes, which clearly manifest to the minutest degree who he truly has become. *“Nothing is concealed from him; all lies bare and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account” (Heb.4:13).*

Here under the vision of God a person truly is named. The judgment of God is but the eternal declaration of what we have become through the decisions of our hearts--our willed decisions. What we affirm in time, God will re-affirm in eternity. God will eternally ratify man's will.

There is a song sung by some Christians that asks, "*Have you decided to follow Jesus?*" It goes on to sing that even "*though none go with me, still I will follow...the cross before me, the world behind me... I have decided to follow Jesus.*" How true it is that those who follow Jesus must have the Cross before them and the world behind them. However, many Christians who have made that decision are like new drivers on the Los Angeles freeways, who head east thinking they are going west and end in the desert instead of at the shore. There is always the danger that we Christians will get our directions mixed up,, and before we know it the world is before us and the Cross far behind us. That is why it is not safe for a Christian to drive it alone. They might never even recognize that they have been turned around and are heading in the wrong direction.

Our author has deliberately placed his readers before the judgment seat of divine justice. Later he will write, "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Heb.10:31). He desires that his readers fully experience the fear of this without mitigation. There they will experience what the ultimate verdict of divine justice must be: "*You have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting!*"

## THE MAIN THEME

All that has previously been written has led up to the theme now to be developed--the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is the essential theme of the Epistle, and it is the author's unique contribution to the Christology of the Christian Church. Our author has established the superiority of Jesus Christ over angels and Moses. This he did in order to establish the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood. He emphasizes the two natures of Jesus Christ when he refers to Him as "*Jesus, the Son of God.*" He considered both these natures as necessary for Jesus to fulfill the role of high priest. He tells his readers: "*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our profession of faith*" (Heb.4:14).

He suggests that Jesus is already at work before the throne of God on behalf of His people. It is the role of the high priest to expiate the sins of the people and to make intercession for them before God. He suggests Jesus has entered into Heaven, and there He mediates before God for sinful human beings who have placed their trust and confidence in Him. Therefore, he urges his readers to cling and hold fast to their profession of faith as a man would cling to a life preserver in a stormy sea. Once again the author insists upon a public profession of faith. Private conviction is not sufficient.

*“Hold fast to our profession of faith”* implies an open declaration of it before men. As Catholics those words, “Let us hold fast to our profession of Faith” should be deeply rooted in our hearts. The Catholic Church has a vision of Truth that is distinct from that of non-catholic Churches. Catholics must be true to their vision of Faith if they do not want to offend the Holy Spirit--the Spirit of Truth, and even be led into a sin against the Holy Spirit. To deliberately deny a revealed Truth could be a sin against the Holy Spirit because it implies the Holy Spirit to be a lying Spirit. Our author urges his readers to approach, here and now, the throne of grace without fear. There they will find a high priest who has a heart of sympathy for them: *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned”* (Heb.4:15).

The writer teaches that Jesus identified completely with human nature but not with human perversion--our sinfulness. The sinlessness of Jesus does not militate against the genuineness of his humanity. Sin is not natural for man even though it is common to him. It is not an essential element of humanity. Jesus experienced the effects of sin upon His life, not through personal sin, but through His assuming man's nature, tainted through the sin of Adam.

It may be asked, how is it possible for God to know as a human being what He did not know as God? It is true since God created man, nothing good in man could be beyond the knowledge of God. God made man to his image and likeness. When God beheld His creation, He said: *It is Good!* However, what came to be in man through sin was evil. Evil is a privation of a due good. It is not positive but negative. Evil is a lack of a due good. Suffering and death are absences of good health and life. There would be an implied contradiction to say that God, in His divine nature, could experience a lack of good--evil. That would imply a diminishing of God. As an intelligent Being, God would know sin in man through its effect upon man--through its spoiling His creation. This

He would even know before it occurred. However, God could not, as a Divine Person experience evil through His Divine Nature.

A doctor can come to know all about a disease by studying its negative effects upon his patients. Father Damien knew all about leprosy. However, when Father Damien contracted leprosy, he experienced leprosy and knew it in an entirely different manner. God in His divine nature could not know the experience of suffering and death. Only by the Person of God assuming the nature of fallen man was it possible for God to experience in His Person the evil effects of sin.

It may also be asked how Jesus Christ can be completely identified with us if he did not experience the "pleasure" of sin. First we must understand that Jesus Christ could not have endured the complete and total suffering of temptation and still experience the pleasure of giving into a temptation. That too would imply a contradiction. However, the pleasure itself is not the sin. The normal sinner seeks good and not evil. Only a completely corrupt person seeks evil for itself. Jesus certainly experienced pleasure. He experienced the pleasure of life and the desire to conserve it. This pleasure became a temptation only when the conserving of it impeded God's Will for Jesus--that He must suffer and die. He had to abandon that desire of pleasure that is the root of all other pleasures--life itself.

Adultery and fornication are not sins because sexual intercourse is evil, but because God forbids sexual intercourse under these circumstances. Jesus certainly experienced pleasure and the desire for it, but He would not experience pleasure at the price of sin. Jesus personally experienced sin insofar as the sin of Adam effected and affected the human nature assumed. That, no doubt, encompasses, in some degree, the entire experience of sin. Jesus did not experience illicit pleasure, but He did experience the total sufferings implied in completely rejecting the temptation to seek it. He certainly experienced the bitter effects of sin--suffering and death. I think we can agree with the author of Hebrews that Jesus' identity with our human nature is quite complete. It is we who lack total identity with Him and His human experience.

When the writer urges the readers to approach the throne of grace, he implies that, through their union with Jesus Christ, they share in the priesthood of

Jesus, which gives them access to God. He writes: *“So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor and to find help in time of need” (Heb.4:16).*

The “throne of grace” is not some symbolic seat of mercy but, in the mind of our author, it is the veritable center of divine life and love. To approach the throne of grace in order to seek mercy implies approaching as a sinner. Sinners come seeking the mercy of God, and weak human beings come seeking the aid of God. Jesus came to save sinners and calls them to Himself. The sick need the physician. Our author does not expect Christians to be sinless, but he zealously labors that they will take extreme caution and care to avoid one sin--the sin of apostasy which denies faith in Jesus Christ. For our author, this is a road from which there is no return. This sin is never too far from his mind as he addresses his readers.

Our author reaches that point in his Epistle where he will develop the theme of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. As already mentioned, it will be in the Old Testament that he will find the shadows of this perfect priesthood. There he discovers what is the essential nature and work of the priesthood. From the Scriptures we see that Yahweh Himself appoints certain men from among the Israelites to be priests. The Lord said to Moses, *“From among the Israelites have your brother Aaron, together with his sons...brought to you, that they may be my priests” (Ex.28:1).* *“Aaron and his sons you shall also anoint and consecrate as my priests” (Ex.30:30).*

We read in chapter twenty-nine the rite by which they shall be consecrated priest. This consecration set them apart for the work of God. *“You must be able to distinguish between what is sacred and what is profane, what is clean and what is unclean!” (Lv.10:11).* They are set apart to be holy and this is to be symbolized. Yahweh told Moses: *“You shall give instructions to make such vestments for Aaron as will set him apart for his sacred service as my priest” (Ex.28:3b).*

The priests are to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people: *“Once a year Aaron shall perform the atonement rite... Throughout your generations this atonement is to be made once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering...” (Ex.30:10).*

The Lord chooses the Levites to assist Aaron: *“Summon the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest, as his assistants... But only Aaron and his descendants shall you appoint to have charge of the priestly functions. Any layman who comes near shall be put to death”* (Nm.3:6,10).

When certain Levites rebelled and said, *“Enough from you! The whole community, all of them, are holy; the Lord is in their midst. Why then should you set yourselves over the Lord’s congregation?”* (Nm.16:3b), they offered incense to God and were destroyed by God (See Nm.16:4-35). After this we read: *“No layman, no one who was not a descendant of Aaron should approach the altar to offer incense before the Lord, lest he meet the fate of Korah and his band”* (Nm.17:5b).

No sacrifice was to be offered to Yahweh not decreed by Him. The two older priestly sons of Aaron, Nadab and, Abihu, *“offered up before the Lord profane fire, such as he had not authorized. Fire therefore came forth from the Lord’s presence and consumed them”* (Lv.10:1-2a). Reflecting upon this Old Testament portrait, the author of Hebrews gives this description of the priesthood:

*Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with erring sinners, for he himself is beset by weakness and so must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. One does not take this honor on his own initiative, but only when called by God as Aaron was* (Heb.5:1-4).

From this foundation he proceeds to show how Jesus is the new priest and to show the superiority of this new priesthood over the Levitical priesthood that was but its pale reflection.



## CHAPTER 5

### BEYOND THE INITIAL TEACHINGS

#### INTRODUCTION

The Book of Genesis teaches of the beginnings of mankind. In picturesque language it tells that it is an essential part of our human nature to communicate and be united to God. Separated from God, mankind can never be completely itself. Genesis reveals that a separation did occur within this essential relationship with mankind, who deliberately and willfully rejected the authority of God over itself. The Absence that resulted from this separation would perpetually haunt the human heart and turn it into a restless “street-walker” seeking its lost love. Paul once wrote, *“God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (Rom.11:29)*. Reflecting on the human condition St. Augustine observed, *“Our hearts are made for you, and they will not rest until they rest in you.”*

Mankind’s search for union with God is a universal experience. No tribe on earth has been discovered that did not possess an awareness of the unseen Divine Reality and did not desire and will some kind of union with this unseen Power. On the other hand, mankind has simultaneously experienced a sense of sin and alienation from the Divine that produces a fear of union with God. When a certain man spoke of his original innocence, the English writer G. K. Chesterton dryly remarked, *“The only thing you know about original innocence is that you never had it.”* That truly expresses the universal experience.

In order to establish a harmonious relationship between the deity and itself, mankind devised rites of worship and appointed ministers of these rites through which it could communicate with God. These ministers were the priests of the people. As representatives of the people, they had the duty to bring people to God and to serve as a channel for bringing God to people. Often these religious rites expressed a primitive desire to placate and manipulate an unseen hostile power or give honor to a friendly unseen power.

In primitive, natural religions people came to the priesthood because of their superior position in society. The fathers of families, the head of clans, and the kings of the countries were the priests. In the Old Testament, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear as family priests; Melchizedek, Saul, David, Solomon, and Ahaz appear as kingly priests. The last four acted in the capacity of priests after the establishment of the Levitical priesthood. In the same manner, men came to the priesthood through personal charism and superior knowledge within primitive societies. Within this group we find the sorcerers, medicine men, and guardians of shrines that delivered oracles and prophets--true and false. The prophet Samuel acted as a priest, and so did the false prophet Balaam.

The Hebrew name for priest still survives today in the Jewish family name of Cohen (Kohen). The word for priesthood (*kehunnah*) and the verb "to act as a priest" (*kihen*) are derivatives of the noun *kohen*. Its root meaning remains unknown and is perhaps lost within the ancient Canaanite language, which also used *kohen* to express the term priest. The Greek word translated priest (*kierous*) appears in the New Testament in relationship to Jewish priests.

The leaders of the Christian Community were called elders (in Greek, *presbuteroi*), men whom the apostles appointed in all the churches after prayer and fasting and laying on of hands. They were also called overseers (in Greek, *episkopoi*). Paul gives instructions to Titus about the selection and character of men chosen to be presbyters (see Titus 1: 5-10). He warns Timothy, "*Never lay hands hastily on anyone, or you will be sharing in the misdeeds of others*" (Tm.5:22). Only after the first century was a distinction made between elders as priests, and overseers as bishops. First Peter refers to the Christian Community as a priesthood (*pierteuma*) who must offer spiritual sacrifice. This no doubt echoes Yahweh's words to the Israelites, "*You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation*" (Ex.19:6).

In the ancient world the priest was to be the oracle of God. An oracle is supposedly a communication of the revealed Will of Yahweh as a guide of action. The Torah (the Law) was considered to be a systematic communication of this revelation. It was the duty of a priest, therefore, to teach and instruct the people concerning God's Will. The prophet Malachi wrote:

*For the lips of the priest are to keep knowledge, and instruction is to*

*be sought from his mouth, because he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts (Ma1.2:7).*

Through the prophet Hosea, Yahweh said this of the priests:

*My people perish for want of knowledge! Since you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you from my priesthood; since you have ignored the law of your God, I will also ignore your sons (Hos.4:6).*

We read in Jeremiah: *“Those who dealt with the law knew me not: the shepherds rebelled against me” (Jer.2:8b).* In his instruction about Christian Presbyters, Paul wrote Titus:

*In his teaching he must hold fast to the authentic message, so that he will be able both to encourage men to follow sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it. There are many irresponsible teachers, ...men who are empty talkers and deceivers. These must be silenced. They are upsetting whole families by teaching things they have no right to teach--and all for sordid gain! (Ti:1:9-11).*

A supreme task of priests was to offer sacrifice to God for the people. Hardly any religion existed that did not have a sacrificial ritual. It expressed man's belief in God and the desire to worship him. The oldest Hebrew word for sacrifice is *menhah*, meaning gift. This word later came to specify offerings of grain and cereal. Later the word *qorban* (Corban) expressed sacrifice in general.

The Israelites considered the offering of any valuable gift to God as a sacrifice. Primarily through sacrifice, a gift was made to God that expressed the homage of a subject to its Lord and the subject's desire to please and be united with the lord. Of course the best must be offered. We read this complaint from Yahweh,

*A son honors his father, and a servant fears his master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due to me? ... When you offer a blind animal for sacrifice, is this not evil? When you offer the lame or the sick, is it not evil? Present it to your governor; see if he will accept it, or welcome you, says the Lord of hosts (Mal.1:6a,8).*

As mankind possessed the universal awareness of sin, sacrifice was offered to expiate sins. However, all sacrifice was not expiatory. When the one offering felt purified of sin, sacrifices were offered for many personal reasons. However, since sin and its awareness were common daily experiences, sacrifice to expiate the sins of the people played a major role in ritual sacrifice. Therefore, the most common word for sacrifice in the Old Testament was *zeboh*, which meant a sacred slaughtering. The common word designating altar was *mizbeah*, meaning the place of slaughter.

At this point let us recall the significance of blood in Jewish ritual worship. The Jews believed in the sacredness of blood as the channel of life. Deuteronomy speaks of “*blood is life*” and “*the seat of life*” (see Dt.12:22). The Jews believed God to be the source of all life, and therefore “*living blood*” carried the “*divine*” life. Blood came to be seen as the means for purifying people of their sins. We read in Leviticus:

*Since the life of a living body is in its blood, I have made you put it on the altar, so that atonement may thereby be made for your own lives, because it is the blood, as the seat of life, that makes atonement (Lv.17:11).*

By a person’s contact with sacrificial blood, a contact with divine life occurs that purifies the sinner. In Jewish ritual the life of an animal was not sacrificed for the sake of God but primarily for people--to sprinkle a person with this “*living blood*” in order to purify him or her of sins. The life was sacrificed for people and not for God. This thought could not have been far from the mind of John when he wrote, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*”

For the Jewish People, the most sacred day of religious worship was the yearly Feast of the Atonement. On this day of the year, the high priest entered into the very Holy of Holies and invoked the sacred name of Yahweh. It was the only day the high priest entered the inner sanctuary and the only time the name of God was audibly pronounced. It was on this day the high priest made atonement for the sins of the Jewish Community as a whole. For the author of Hebrews, the Day of Atonement was the omega point of the Jewish priesthood and ritual sacrifice. It was the prefiguring of that perfect priestly act that would atone for the sins of all mankind.

On the Day of Atonement the high priest's identification with the people is made very evident. The first act of the day was to purify himself through a ritual washing, then vested in his priestly attire he approached a bull upon which he laid his hands and prayed:

*O Lord, I and my house have committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned in Thy sight. O Lord, pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquities, the transgressions, and the sins, which I and my house have committed in Thy sight.*

After this, lots were cast over two goats selecting one for sacrifice and the other as the scapegoat. Next he approached a second bull and repeated the same prayer but extending it to include the entire priesthood of Aaron. The two bulls and the goat were sacrificed that day. With the blood of sacrifice, the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies wherein rested the Ark of the Covenant. When Solomon constructed the temple he placed the Ark there. We are told that the Glory of God in the form of a bright cloud rested upon the Ark. This Ark symbolized Israel's covenant with Yahweh, and the cloud of glory above the Ark represented God's abiding Presence among the Israelites. The high priest sprinkled the blood upon the gold lip that covered the Ark. In Hebrew it was called the *kapporet* and in English, the propitiatory. This was commonly referred to as "the Mercy Seat" of Yahweh.

When the blood was sprinkled upon the *kapporet*, Yahweh granted forgiveness to Israel. Once given, the people and the temple were reconsecrated to Yahweh, and Israel became a holy nation. As we shall see our author will discuss this at some length in chapter nine of Hebrews.

The Book of Exodus presents Israel as a holy nation and the people of Israel as priests. Israel was "*a kingdom of priests*" (Ex.19:6a). From this foundation, Korah and the 250 Israelite leaders challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron with these words:

*Enough from you! The whole community, all of them, are holy; the Lord is in their midst. Why then should you set yourselves over the Lord's congregation? (Nm.16:3b-c).*

The ideal being that Israel, by keeping the covenant, would become a holy people offering the spiritual worship of their lives to Yahweh. They indeed would have had access to him. However, the ideal was not achieved. From

among the Israelites, Yahweh set aside the tribe of Levi for religious services. From the tribe of Levi, He chose the family of Aaron as priests to represent the people before Him. This appointment flowed from the inscrutable Will of God--beyond challenge and dispute. We learn from the case of Korah and his band that it is dangerous for people to appoint their own representatives in religious matters, but even more dangerous for a man to take the office upon himself.

## PRIESTLY QUALIFICATIONS

Our author presents Jesus' claim to a priesthood superior to that of the Levitical priesthood. The author had previously mentioned the qualifications he deemed essential for a person to be a true high priest. First he must be taken from among the people for whom, as their representative, he will offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Since he comes from the people he can identify with them and understand their spiritual condition which he himself must experience.

Secondly, a high priest must have that quality of character which enables him to be patient with human frailty. The word translated patient (*metriopathein*) carries the connotation of a person very balanced in their reactions to the sins and weaknesses of others. On the one hand the person does not react to the sins of others with overwhelming grief or with explosive anger, on the other hand the person does not react with indifference or lazy indulgence. In a concrete situation, the person suffers the sinful behavior of another while fraternally seeking--in a calm, just and active manner--to correct the sinful behavior. The implication is that a high priest ought to be a person who first has learned to deal maturely with his own human weaknesses, which enables him to deal maturely with the weaknesses of others.

Lastly, and most importantly, a person must be called to the priesthood by God.

Our author begins with the last and most important qualification. He quotes Psalms 2 and 110 to support the priesthood of Jesus Christ. He writes:

*Even Christ did not glorify himself with the office of high priest; he received it from the One who said to him, "You are my son; today I have begotten you," just as he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb.5:5-6).*

He calls to mind the divine sonship of Christ, which of itself expressed His right to the fullness of glory and which proclaimed His kingly position in the house of God. Despite all this, in His humility, the Son of God did not assume the position of high priest even though He was sinless. Quoting Psalm 110 that proclaims the kingly exaltation of Christ, the author implies that Christ assumes the role of high priest out of obedience to the Father: *“The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent: You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps.110:4).*

The words of this Psalm stimulated the writer’s contemplation of Melchizedek. In Melchizedek, he discovered an earthly priesthood he deduced to be superior to that of the Levitical priesthood represented by Aaron and his family. In the example of Melchizedek he saw the reflection of that heavenly priesthood entered into by Jesus Christ.

Melchizedek was an intriguing personality for the Jewish students of the Old Testament. Important men of the Old Testament usually appear on the Old Testament scene with their “alpha and omega”--their beginning and end. However, Melchizedek makes a cameo or guest appearance on the stage of Jewish history. He makes his appearance in chapter 14 of Genesis as King of Salem (interpreted to mean King of Peace). Salem has traditionally been identified with Jerusalem. Melchizedek is announced as “Priest of the Most High God.” He encounters Abram on his return from a great victory, and he brought out bread and wine, presumably as a sacrificial offering. He blessed Abram. In return Abram gave Melchizedek a “tenth of everything.” By so doing, Abram symbolized the superiority of Melchizedek over himself.

In Abraham, the Jewish people acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek and his priesthood. When the Christ is declared to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek, it implies the superiority of his priesthood over the Levitical priesthood. Since Melchizedek had neither beginning nor end as he appeared in the Scriptures, he was a symbol of eternity. Since no end of his priesthood is recorded, his priesthood symbolized an eternal priesthood. It will be drawn from this that the priesthood of Christ was eternal and therefore no successors were needed. When it is understood that the sacrifice offered by Christ was the perfect sacrifice, no other would ever be needed.

The writer establishes the other qualification for Jesus to be high priest when he writes:

*In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered (Heb.5:7-8).*

The writer reveals Jesus' identity with mankind and human weakness when he speaks of those "days when he was in the flesh." Flesh, as mentioned earlier, would be human life vulnerable to trials, temptations and death. The "flesh" is human existence as it has become because of Adam's sin.

It appears the author has a particular moment of Christ's life in mind. His words do not suggest a continual state of existence but rather a moment of crisis. As knowledge of the Passion narrative was widely known in the Christian Community, the author is probably referring to those moments in the Garden of Gethsemane the evening before Jesus died. The expression "with prayers and supplications" implies a definite prayer request was made from one who was in urgent need of protection from some calamitous evil. The need itself was expressed more by position and gesture than through words. Those words "with loud cries and tears" express the situation in which a heart filled with pain and terror cries out involuntarily. In the Gospel narrative, Jesus told His disciples when they were in the garden:

*He began to be filled with fear and distress (Mk.14:34a).*

*My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death (Mk.14:34b).*

*My heart is nearly broken with sorrow (Mt.26:38a).*

*In his anguish he prayed with all the greater intensity, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground (Lk.22:44).*

For what did Jesus pray? Did He pray to be freed from the sufferings and death facing Him? Luke writes:

*He went down on his knees and prayed in these words: "Father, if it is your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (Lk.22:42).*



Our writer says: *“And he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb.5:7c).*

“To hear” does not necessarily imply acceding to one’s wishes. As someone observed, “The divine vocabulary is not limited to a single word ‘Yes!’” The prayer was heard and the request denied--at least on the level it was sought. Jesus was certainly saved, not from physical death, but from eternal death. Jesus triumphed--in the full face of that suffering flowing from sin--with those words: *“Not my will but yours be done.”* Jesus would drink the cup of human suffering to the last drop and only then say, *“It is consummated!”* and bow his weary head in death.

In the act of death He was to experience the fullness of the effect of sin. At His death His identity with sinful humanity would be complete. Luke tells us that there in the garden *“an angel then appeared to him from heaven to strengthen him” (Lk.22:43).* How we should love that angel who consoled Jesus, suffering so grievously for our sins, when human beings had not a drop of encouragement or sympathy to give him. *“He rose from prayer and came to his disciples, only to find them asleep” (Lk.22:45).* O blessed be that angel of consolation!

The author observes, *“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb.5:8).* As Son of God His Will is perfectly One with the Father’s. When the will of one flows naturally with the will of another, obedience is easy and joyous. However, when the will of the Father points in one direction and the human will of the Son desires to go another direction, one has arrived at the crossroads of obedience. One has arrived at the Cross.

Whose will will be done? In which direction does one go? To deliberately choose the will of another is an expression of love for them. To habitually do so indicates you love them more than self. Jesus faced the demands of the Father’s Will with every fiber of His human nature crying out against it. When He accepted the Will of God, He accepted not only death to His own willed desires, but death to His very self.

Once He had taught, *“Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will preserve it.” (Mk.8:34.)* He was marking the Way that He encouraged us to follow. As a human being, Jesus expressed perfect love of God by obediently accepting death on the Cross. His human love reached its perfection at that moment. Even as a child of this earth, Jesus was the perfect Son of God. The human race had fallen through

the sin of one man. It was to rise through the obedience of one man. (See Rom.5:19.)

Because of this obedience our author sees Jesus being designated by God as *“high priest according to the order of Melchizedek”* (Heb.5:10). As high priest, Jesus Christ is *“the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”* (Heb.5:9). Once again the author ties salvation with obedience. The writer indicates that the priesthood belonged to Jesus as Son, and also from an eternal oath of God: *“The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent”* (Ps.110:4).

However, Jesus did not assume that priesthood until “designated by God” to do so. This apparently suggests that this designation occurred upon Christ’s entrance into Heaven. On this earth Jesus did not act as priest since the earthly priesthood was filled by the Levitical priesthood. (The Last Supper and Calvary would be an exception--in a different order of things.)

The presence of priests certainly existed at the death of Jesus. Through the instigation of the high priest--who had laid his hands on Jesus--Jesus went to His death “as a Lamb led to the slaughter.” Did the Levitical priesthood reach its perfection and completion when it sacrificed Jesus upon the Cross? Perhaps it could be said that Jesus and the Jewish high priest “concelebrated” at that sacrifice.

## SPIRITUAL RETARDATION

Our author knows that he is now moving within deep theological waters--waters unfamiliar to his readers. Apparently, it provokes him that he cannot discuss this subject at the depth he desires. He frankly tells them, as Paul once told the Corinthians, they are spiritually immature. By this time, in their journey of faith, they should be so advanced in the Christian Religion as to be teachers, but here they are back in the kindergarten of Christianity. This has been due to a listless spirit and inattentiveness to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Such a spirit indicates spiritual indifference. The author implies Christianity ought to be an on-going maturing process, in which greater knowledge leads to a greater manifestation of virtues. With Paul, he believes a Christian ought to be putting on the mind of Christ. He implies they have stifled their intellectual progress in the science of Christ, and in turn impeded their own spiritual progress. This may well indicate the evil spirit of sloth. As he tells his readers:

*About this we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, for you have become deaf. Although by this time you should be teaching others, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God; you need milk, not solid food. Everyone whose food is milk alone is ignorant of the word that sanctifies, for he is a child. Solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to distinguish good from evil (Heb.5:11-14).*

How closely the words of the writer recall St. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians:

*Brothers, the trouble was that I could not talk to you as spiritual men but only as men of flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, and did not give you solid food because you were not ready for it. You are not ready for it even now, being still very much in a natural condition (1Cor.3:1-3).*

We see that Paul attributes this spiritual retardation to living one's Christian life out on the natural level. At this dimension there will be no experience of God, therefore little opportunity for an increase in faith, hope and charity. Our author is not going to be intimidated by the immaturity of his readers; he will endeavor to raise their level of spiritual awareness in hopes of stimulating some interest and growth in his readers. He not only exhorts his readers but, as a spiritual teacher, states his goal: *"Let us, then, go beyond the initial teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, not laying the foundation all over again" (Heb.6:1a).*

It is the author's goal that he and they should progress spiritually. He exhorts them not to remain static. The spiritual life is an on-going process of spiritual growth as was the earthly life of Jesus Christ. His life only reached its perfection at the end of His earthly life. The same word used to describe the perfection achieved by Jesus is used to describe the goal of Christian life. This "putting on the mind of Christ" is a day-by-day growing in the Spirit.

Growth in Christ is a spiritual adventure that cannot be entered into unless one is willing, in Abraham faith, to leave the known behind for the unknown. Growth in Christ cannot be entered into unless one is willing to let God change things. Obviously, one cannot go forward unless one is willing to leave where one presently is. However, a faithful Christian will learn one day that

nothing good is ever lost. It is only apparently lost for a time. It will be found incorporated into one's future. "All my child's fancies as lost, have been stored for me at home."

## CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION

As a wise teacher of the Christian Faith, the writer is well aware of the necessity of a good foundation in the Christian Religion. One cannot build a solid Christian life unless it rises upon a solid Christian foundation. However, a foundation is a foundation and not an edifice. The author does not wish to imply that the maturing of one's life comes through personal efforts. Rather, maturity comes by the person's surrender to the daily influence of the Spirit within oneself. This surrender is not limited to moments of conversion or spiritual crisis; it is a continuous process gently moving the Christian spirit toward its perfection.

The author desires no one to proceed toward Christian maturity unless he or she has been firmly grounded in the fundamental principles of Christianity. This would be like building upon sand, which could not support a Christian commitment in times of storm. The author is familiar with his readers' earlier beginnings. The foundation was well laid. Nothing could be achieved by going through it all again. He enumerates what he considers to be the fundamentals of Christian Life: "*Repentance from dead works, faith in God, instruction about baptisms and laying-on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment*" (Heb.5:1b-2).

These essential elements are divided into three sets: repentance from dead works and faith which would deal with a Christian's inner personal life with God; baptisms and the laying-on of hands which would be concerned with the social aspect of the Christian life, and entrance into the community and one's Christian service within the community; resurrection and judgment which deal with the goal and end of Christian Life. These last two would be the objects of our Christian hope which Paul says cannot be experienced on this earth, but presently ought to affect the way we live our lives.

Repentance and Faith in God would be the fundamental environment in which a true Christian personality develops. They are the opposite sides of one coin. If one or the other is lacking, a life will fail to be Christian. In the first sermon given by Jesus as recorded by Mark we hear: "*The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!*" (Mk.1:15). In the first

sermon delivered by the Church we hear: *“You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).*

Repentance (*metanoia*) implies a radical change within the life of a person. For St. Paul, dead works would be human life lived in the flesh. Dead works would be those deeds done by unredeemed humanity or done outside of God’s grace. A life of dead works is a life lived for self which uses the gifts and faculties of human life in selfish pursuits. Paul clearly describes such a life in chapters six and seven of Romans. Repentance from dead works can be expressed as that radical change of heart that turns from life centered upon self to a life centered in God. It is a spiritual revolution within that alters the previous course of one’s life. It is an abandonment of the old style of living as when Matthew the tax-collector became an apostle of Jesus Christ. When a person lives a life of faith in God, the life becomes God-centered. This would be that Abraham faith that follows God with a childlike confidence from the known to the unknown.

Unless a person has come to repentance and faith, Christian instruction may be no more than rain falling upon a tin roof. As our author writes:

*Ground which drinks in the rain falling on it again and again, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives the blessing of God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless; it is soon cursed, and finally is burned (Heb.6:7-8).*

A repentant and faithful spirit receives Christian instruction like the “ground which drinks in the rain” and produces fruit. When one thinks of the amount of Christian education some people have received where the end product often has been nothing but “thorns and thistles” of unconcern and indifference, one wonders if the cart hasn’t been put before the horse. Our author does indicate that *after* repentance and faith come instruction. We see from Acts that baptism often followed immediately upon the person coming to repentance and faith. After Peter’s first sermon we read: *“Those who accepted his message were baptized; some three thousand were added that day” (Acts 2:41).*

Perhaps this was possible because the religious background of those Jewish converts was very similar to that of the Apostles. This practice certainly did not continue in the Church, especially where Gentiles were coming into the Church from a total pagan background. Time proved that even many of the

Jews brought erroneous teachings into the Church. However, we do see from Acts that even if instruction did not precede baptism, it followed it. We read that the new converts “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ instructions*” (Acts 2: 42). Later we know that catechumens were kept under instruction for a lengthy time, and kept under close observation.

The author mentioned that the fundamental subjects in which his readers had been well grounded were: baptisms, laying-on of hands, resurrection and eternal judgment. This enumeration implies a complete instruction in the fundamentals of the Christian life from the moment of one’s entrance into that life through baptism, until one’s life ends in resurrection and eternal judgment. The author mentioned “baptisms.” We see from Paul’s instruction to the men in Ephesus that instruction was needed to clarify the difference between Christian baptism and John’s baptism. We also know a baptismal rite was practiced in Judaism.

Life in Christ means Christian service. The second teaching dealt with the laying-on of hands. The laying-on of hands symbolized a solemn blessing by which a recipient could receive power, an office, a commission to work, a healing, or a removal of an excommunication. It was a complement to the rite of baptism. Instructions about the laying-on of hands would include teachings on the Holy Spirit, gifts and ministries--their uses and abuses, and teachings on healing and ordination.

Instructions on the resurrection of the dead would be teachings on Christian Hope; what would be the end and reward for being a Christian in this world; how, through the Holy Spirit, one had entered into this resurrected life but not into its fullness. We find in chapter fourteen of First Corinthians the fullest instruction on the resurrection of the dead in the New Testament.

## THE ETERNAL SIN

The author concluded his list of catechetical instructions with eternal judgment. It is called eternal for it will decree the final state of one’s being--eternally saved or eternally lost. The thought of eternal judgment causes the author to comment on what will be the fate of those who apostasize from the Christian Religion. He certainly intended a correlation between eternal judgment and the eternal sin of apostasy. The following verses are some of the most severe to be found in the New Testament. He will conclude this section of

his presentation with thoughts even more severe (see Heb.10:26-31). We read in chapter six:

*For when men have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and become sharers in the Holy Spirit, when they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to make them repent again, since they are crucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt. Ground which drinks in the rain falling on it again and again, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives the blessing of God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless; it is soon cursed, and finally is burned (Heb.6:4-8).*

The reader must be very careful not to take the author's conclusion, "*It is impossible to make them repent again,*" out of context. It must be seen in the dimension in which it is made. Within its proper context, it may be equated with the unforgivable sin mentioned by Jesus Christ. It does not imply that the sin of apostasy is unforgivable, but that the sin of apostasy under these conditions cannot be forgiven. It is important to keep these conditions in mind. This certainly would not be a description of some ill-informed, cultural Christian who drifts away from the faith, or is enticed by deception to embrace some non-Christian sect. They leave what they never knew. They quit what they never had. Often the sin lies heavier with those who failed to properly instruct and guard them. We read in Ezekiel:

*So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered over the whole earth, with no one to look after them or to search for them (Ez.34:5-6).*

Our author speaks of Christians who have been "illuminated." Here there is no fundamental ignorance or lack of due knowledge. They have "tasted" the heavenly gifts. The word taste implies a true spiritual experience--equivalent to a baptism in the Spirit. They have become sharers in the Holy Spirit. They experienced the Holy Spirit within their lives and knew Him through personal experience. They have not only experienced the essentials of the Christian Religion, but they have experienced the flowering of Christianity within their lives. "*They have tasted the good word of God.*" Their minds have not been left in the dark but illuminated to behold the beauty of their faith. They have tasted "*the power of the world to come.*" They have experienced within their

lives the power of the Resurrected Christ. To now reject faith in Jesus Christ would be, in a sense, equivalent to killing Him within their lives—“*crucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding Him up to contempt.*”

It has been said that the fallen angels cannot repent because they made their willed decisions fully enlightened. Nothing later could alter their decision. In the mind of the author, such people have received the full experience of being a Christian. Nothing was lacking. A repetition of these experiences and gifts would change nothing. He deduces “*it is impossible to make them repent again.*” Of course that implies there is nothing the Church can do. It leaves the door still open for the Grace of God “*to whom nothing is impossible.*” How can such a condition come to be? How do angels fall from glory? The Scriptures teach that a Christian can come to this illumination, possess the Holy Spirit, be enriched with His gifts, and yet still lack the one most essential quality of Christian Life--Divine Love:

*If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1Cor.13:2-3).*

We see from the teachings of Jesus recorded in Matthew 7:21-23, that on the day of “eternal judgment” Christian people will be rejected because they lived loveless lives as Christians.

Our author is very careful to indicate that he is not implying his readers have come to this state. He congratulates his readers on their lives of charity, and assures them that God will reward them. For the first and only time he calls them “beloved.” “*Beloved, even though we speak in this way, we are persuaded of better things in your regard, things pointing to your salvation.*” What are the things in his mind that point to the fact that they are being saved? He goes on to say: “*God is not unjust: he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him by your service, past and present, to his holy people*” (Heb.6:9-10).

The work they have done for God and the love they have shown to God that expressed itself in service to the Christian Community are the signs pointing to the fact that they are being saved. However, being saved does not mean saved.



It is neither their past nor present behavior that concerns him, but their future behavior. He has detected manifestations of “*an evil and unfaithful spirit*” expressing itself in a disinterest in their spiritual progress and welfare. Our author has a shrewd spiritual eye. He detects the root cause of the spiritual illness. The Christian virtue of Hope has become inoperative in their lives. “*In hope we are saved,*” says Paul. When Christian lives become hopeless they become spiritually listless. Energy is lacking to do the Will of God. A person can drift into a spirit of passive aggression toward the Will of God and passive resistance to His Will. Our author insists that this road, if persisted upon, leads to disbelief. Hopelessness is their present problem: apostasy could be their future problem. He exhorts them:

*Our desire is that each of you should have the same zeal to the end, fully assured of that for which you hope. Do not grow lazy, but imitate those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises (Heb.6:15).*

Their hope is doubly assured because “Jesus Christ our Hope,” by an oath of God, has become the eternal high priest.

The writer presents Abraham for their contemplation. As Paul had taught, Abraham became the great example of the faith and hope of the Christian Community to be found in the Holy Scriptures:

*When God made his promise to Abraham, he swore by himself, having no one greater to swear by, and said, “I will indeed bless you, and multiply you.” And so, after patient waiting, Abraham obtained what God had promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves: an oath gives firmness to a promise and puts an end to all argument. God, wishing to give the heirs of his promise [the Christian Community] even clearer evidence that his purpose would not change, guaranteed it by oath [“I have sworn and will not repent: you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”], so that, by two things that are unchangeable, in which he could not lie, we who have taken refuge in him might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope which is placed before us. Like a sure and firm anchor, that hope extends beyond the veil through which Jesus, our forerunner, has entered on our behalf, being made high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb.6:13-20).*

Hope is the power that enables one to see one's unseen, to behold one's future. Presently a Christian is "in Christ" and Christ is in glory. "In Christ" the Christian is already potentially in glory. If a Christian shows "*the same zeal to the end*" in the future he or she will be present with Christ in glory. As a Christian I can see that even though I am presently "in Christ" I am imperfect. I cannot be "with Christ" until I am perfected.

Nothing imperfect can exist in heaven. No imperfect person would want to be there. My imperfection would spoil the perfection of the heavenly scene. My presence would lessen heaven for the rest. The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ was made perfect through that which he suffered on earth. It is God's Will, not that I suffer, but that the suffering I must endure should be the means of my perfection. God Wills that I, too, as his earthly son, be perfected through what I suffer.

I am perfected through my will. Since sin is in the will, so is sin's undoing within the will. By that is not meant the forgiveness of sins committed, but the evil effects caused by sins. The will is like an iron bar bent by sin away from God's will. Too many bad decisions and choices have been made. One decision, one choice for God may bring the state of grace, but it does not undo the harm I deliberately did to my will. Perfection is achieved when the human-will can will nothing other than the will of God. The will then reaches total atonement. The work of repentance and redemption, so to speak, completed.

Is suffering the only way in which this may be achieved? Apparently, due to the present condition of sin, it is. From this belief flows the doctrine of Purgatory. If imperfections due to sin have not been purged away through sufferings during earthly life, there is a second chance to achieve our perfection by purgation after physical death. Remember, this has nothing to do with my salvation, but with my perfection; they are not the same. God's grace alone can save me. My cooperation with that grace perfects me, apparently by my cooperating with that grace in sufferings, trials, temptations, pains and death of this earthly life. The Scriptures clearly state the case:

*Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory, God should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering (Heb.2:10).*

*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb.5:8).*

*Since he was himself tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tempted (Heb.2:18).*

**Not only did the sufferings of Jesus become a means for His perfection, but, through His suffering, He was able to become sympathetic and help others.**

**Jesus teaches, “No disciple is above the Master.” He foretold of certain sufferings of His disciples. It is for this reason that suffering, born in faith and patience, increases hope within the mature Christian, and can often be a cause of joy. The mature Christian sees how this is permitted by Heaven as a preparation for Heaven--how something so evil as suffering can make one more like Christ. I, too, can be sympathetic with those who suffer. How truly we can say with Paul: “We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree” (Rom.8:28).**

**Who cares to go to the Grand Banquet honoring the fullness of Christ’s kingship in a dirty, torn, stained garment? We can not only make our festival garment here on earth, but we can make the perfect person who will wear it!**

**We do not have to seek suffering, it will find us. Once in the comic strip, “Maggie and Jiggs,” there was a lightning storm that frightened Maggie, and she hid in the cellar. Jiggs found her there and fatalistically said, “If lightning is going to strike you, Maggie, it will strike you no matter where you are.” Maggie shrewdly replied, “It will have to look for me!”**

**Our Christian Hope confirms the truth that although the Second Coming is delayed, Jesus Christ has not abandoned nor forgotten us. At this very moment He stands behind the “curtain” to intercede for us. Our hope is in Jesus Christ the High Priest. Anchoring our hope in Jesus, brings us, in hope, to the very “throne of grace.” Hope tells us that one day we will rejoice to see how all those black, grey, and blue days of our lives have been woven together with the red, yellow and green days of life into a beautiful portrait of ourselves--finally fitted to adorn the halls of Heaven...**

## CHAPTER 6

### HIGH PRIEST IN HEAVEN

#### INTRODUCTION

The author of Hebrews accused his readers of being “deaf” (see Heb.5:11). Repeatedly he urged them: *“Today, if you should hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”* Their spiritual condition may be such as to make them unable to hear the Voice of God. “To hear” in this context does not mean merely being able to receive audible sounds through the faculty of the ears, but it likewise implies responding faithfully to what is heard. That is why there is a correlation between “heart” and “hear.” To hear in the biblical sense means to obey. Even today a father or mother may say to a child, “Did you hear me?” The desired response to that question is some fast action, not a verbal response.

The word translated “dull” (*notroi*) in the text is often used to express sickness or illness. The author presents a picture of people who are listless and inattentive, suffering from spiritual anemia and no longer capable of a vigorous religious life. From another aspect, he views them as spiritual infants presently lacking that needed spirit of patience to persevere in their Christian commitment.

They had a good past record and they still stand secure, but they are losing their enthusiasm for the Christian religion. Their past and present lives of charitable works point to the fact that they have been traveling the road of salvation. However, the past and present are no guarantee of the future. At the end of the road of faith and charity is eternal salvation. It is a road that demands patient persistence and loving fidelity in order to traverse it to a glorious end. Because the writer has grounds for fear about their future, he prods them: *“Do not grow lazy; imitate those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises” (Heb.6:12).* He urges them to live zealous lives until the last day of their earthly lives. This alone gives full assurance of receiving that for which they presently hope (see Heb.6:11).

As mentioned in the previous lesson, the author denotes a decrease of Christian Hope in the lives of his readers. St. Paul teaches that Jesus Christ is our Hope. The writer detects that his readers are no longer so sure of this--not to the degree they once were. They are questioning putting their hope in Jesus Christ in the face of their present trials and temptations. In addition there had been no speedy Second Coming, which they had been led to believe would be imminent. They had caught the Maranatha fever and now they suffer from the Maranatha blues.

The author strives to rekindle their hope in Jesus Christ. In order to do this he needs to bring them beyond being infants in Christ who feed on the baby's milk of spiritual sweetness and constant consolation. As a wise spiritual director, the author knows that if there is never a dark night, how can the soul exercise its belief in the lamp of faith? If what should be the proper object of Christian Hope is experienced here and now, how can hope, and its inseparable sister patience, grow in the Christian soul? "*In hope we are saved!*" It is patiently enduring the absence of what we hope for that saves us from despair in the night and presumption in the day, and lays a true foundation for Christian Hope.

Our author prudently prepares his Christian friends for the long haul. Certainly he desires the Second Coming as much as they do. However, he views the problem with the eyes of a spiritually matured Christian. Christian teachers do not encourage maturity of Christian life when they constantly stimulate the spiritual lives of Christians by proclaiming the imminent return of Jesus with exact times and dates. Without a doubt, sincere or not, they are false teachers, and many, alas, are for sordid gains. The Scriptures not only tell us that the time of the Second Coming is not part of the revelation given to the Christian Community, but it urges Christians to the daily living of the Christian life, in which a person does the work assigned by the Lord.

Only God knows when the Son will return. And He won't tell us! He wants it to be a Big Surprise. He did say that when it does come, it will be a surprise to all of us. And for some of us it may be a painful surprise, if the Day catches us goofing-off. The Lord does not encourage any "sky-watching"--searching for signs of the Second Coming. The Acts of the Apostles suggest that Jesus had no sooner left this earth than the whole Church was standing around looking for His return: "*They were still gazing up into the heavens*" when the Lord sent down two angels to tell them to get on with the work: "*Men of Galilee,*" they said, "*why do you stand here sky-gazing?*"(Acts 1:11). After this little heavenly

admonition they reluctantly turned to doing some Church work, never putting much heart into the work until the Holy Spirit fired them up with a love for the salvation of their brothers and sisters. However, they never really abandoned a hope for an immediate and easy solution to their problem—"Maranatha!"

The author knew that presently Christians must endure stress of spirit and suffering of body. He could say along with Paul, "*I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us*" (Rom.8:18). Only a mature, hope-filled Christian could honestly say that. He knew, as Paul did, that the current problems, patiently endured, would be the cause of "the glory to be revealed in us." Paul urged the Romans: "*Do not grow slack but be fervent in spirit; he whom you serve is the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient under trial, persevere in prayer*" (Rom.12:12).

From the vantage point of spiritual maturity, the author had a vision of faith that stimulated great hope in Jesus Christ "our Hope." He desired to share this vision with his Christian friends. He did not conceive Jesus as someone who left His loving and dependent friends with the promise: "Wait here, I'll be right back for you." As long as they believed he would be right back, these friends would remain His faithful friends. However, He didn't return--the day waned and the night came. They felt abandoned and perhaps deluded; they were tempted to doubt His friendship and not wait any longer for Him. Perhaps the time had come to look for "another."

The author of Hebrews implies in chapter six: Wait! If you leave you will be lost. Jesus has not forgotten nor abandoned you. You don't understand. At this very moment he has total concern for you. He has only gone ahead to make it possible for you to follow Him. But first, important work must be done in Heaven for you, and on earth in you and through you. Truly says the author, Jesus is only a veil removed from you. And behind that veil stands your only hope. Anchor your hope in Jesus behind the veil, and your salvation will be firmly assured. The rains may fall, the winds may blow and they may beat against your boat but it will not be set adrift and destroyed.

He reveals a great and consoling truth to his readers: "*beyond that veil through which Jesus, our forerunner, has entered on our behalf*" he remains, having been "*made high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*" (Heb.6:19-20). The greatest cause for Christian Hope, our author maintains, is that Jesus Christ has been designated High Priest in Heaven--not as a high

priest of the Levitical priesthood, but one according to the order of Melchizedek. What this means for them, our author will now explain.

The author has already demonstrated that Jesus Christ possessed the necessary qualifications for being a high priest, and in fact had been designated high priest by God. The readers' idea of a high priest would have been programmed by their former concepts of the Jewish high priest. The writer now seeks to clarify what is meant by calling Jesus Christ high priest. He had discovered in the words of Psalm 110 not only proof that Jesus had become a high priest, but he had not become a high priest of the order of Aaron. This messianic Psalm declared the Lordship and Kingliness of Christ, and it likewise proclaimed His priesthood: *"The Lord has sworn and he will not repent: You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek"* (Ps.110:4).

### THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

The Psalm proclaims Jesus to be the same kind of priest as Melchizedek. The author now proceeds to demonstrate the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over the order of Aaron. He quotes from the fourteenth chapter of Genesis. Outside of Psalm 110 this is the only mention of Melchizedek in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Melchizedek appears only in Hebrews. Among the Qumran scrolls, produced by a Jewish sect around the time of Christ, Melchizedek appears as a heavenly being "in the congregation of God." He is said to exact vengeance, and to atone for sins in a jubilee year. Curiosity and speculation about Melchizedek did not end with Qumran.

Certain orthodox Christians upset St. Epiphanius (315-403), known as the "busy-body of the Holy Spirit," as he went around the Mediterranean Churches "sniffing-out" heresies. When these Christians taught that Melchizedek's appearance in the Old Testament was veritable Incarnation of the Son of God, or at least a brief appearance of Christ in the Old Testament, Epiphanius asked them how could it be said in the Scriptures that Jesus Christ was "like" Melchizedek if the two were the same person?

Since the minds of men are ingenious in inventing heresies, it comes as no surprise to discover that in the early days of the Church a heretical group existed called the "Melchizedechians." (How would you like them knocking at your door some Saturday morning?) The Melchizedechians were an off-shoot of Theodotus of Byzantium who developed the Adoption Theory. Theodotus

taught that Jesus was a mere man born in a supernatural manner of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. He maintained God adopted Jesus at His baptism. The Melchizedechians argued that Melchizedek was greater than Christ because Christ was a member of his order. Christ, they maintained, had been sent to turn men from idols and bring them to Melchizedek who in turn brought men to God. The Melchizedechians offered their prayers and sacrifices in his name through whom, they maintained, one found life.

Of course the author of Hebrews never dreamed of opening up that “can of worms.” He made no comparison between Melchizedek and Christ, but only between the priesthood of Melchizedek and the Levitical priesthood. His platonic mind found an example of a high priest prior to and superior to the Levitical priesthood in the Sacred Scriptures. Melchizedek was a “type” of high priest and Jesus Christ was the same “type” of high priest.

As to the superior nature of the High Priest Jesus Christ, our author has already demonstrated Him to be God’s pre-existing Son, Creator of the universe. This role of high priest is a role Jesus assumed and exercised, out of obedience, on behalf of mankind. Since the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ was of the kind of Melchizedek, the author analyzes the priesthood of Melchizedek.

*This Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from his defeat of the kings and blessed him. And Abraham apportioned to him one tenth of all his booty. His name means “king of justice;” he was also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.” Without father, mother or ancestry, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever (Heb.7:1-3).*

In Hebrew the name Melchizedek signifies “My king (is) righteous.” The word *zedek* means righteous. Our author explains this when he says, “*His name means ‘king of justice.’*” Melchizedek is called the “king of Salem” which the author interprets as “king of peace” (shalom). It would be the work of the Messiah to bring about righteousness and peace. As we read in Isaiah:

*For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They named him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David’s throne, and over his kingdom, which he*



*confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever (Is.9:5-6).*

Our author intends his readers to note that righteousness precedes peace. Again as Isaiah wrote: *“Justice will bring about peace; right will produce calm and security” (Is.34:17)*. Unless Jesus Christ brings first righteousness, there cannot be true peace. Righteousness would be a state of sinlessness before God. As High Priest, Jesus Christ must accomplish the work of righteousness by which sinful human beings could come to a freedom from sin. Only in such a condition could a person be essentially at peace--at peace within one's own heart and at peace with God.

Genesis relates that Abram and Melchizedek met as Abram returned from a successful engagement against a coalition among four Canaanite kings. At the time of the encounter with Melchizedek, Abram is still childless. Melchizedek is called a “priest of the Most High God.” It has been pointed out that the title “God Most High” was the name of an Amorean deity. As it appears in Genesis it is identifiable with Yahweh. The expression, God Most High, appears again in Numbers (24:16), Deuteronomy (32:8), and in the Psalms. There is evidence that monotheistic worship of EI (Yahweh) existed in the Phoenician territory side-by-side with the worship of Baal.

It was a rabbinical principle that what is not mentioned in the Torah does not exist. Our author applies this principle to the present text in Genesis. Since there is no mention of Melchizedek's beginning or ending he concludes he had none. He is an eternal figure. So he wrote: *“Without father or mother or ancestry, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever” (Heb.7:3)*.

Such a deduction would be perfectly acceptable at the time in which our author writes. This should not be interpreted that Melchizedek actually possessed eternal life within himself, but only that he appears in the Sacred Scriptures in such a fashion that he biblically becomes the type of priesthood possessed by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ actually possessed eternal life within Himself: *“Just as the Father possesses life in himself, so has he granted it to the Son to have life in himself” (Jn.5:26)*.

The Greek expression, “without father or mother,” would indicate a bastard, an orphan, a low-born person or a deity. Evidently the supernatural origin of Melchizedek is signified here. Our author's only interest is in the Scriptural

**presentation of Melchizedek. He presents an image of an eternal high priest of Yahweh, he blesses Abraham, and Abraham gives tithes to Melchizedek. From these facts the author deduces that Melchizedek possessed a superior priesthood to the levitical priesthood.**

**Before we proceed, it should be noted that our author ignores one element that appeared in the Genesis account--the fact that Melchizedek offered bread and wine. As a long-standing member of the Christian Community, the author was certainly aware of the use of bread and wine in the Christian Liturgy. Since he makes no reference to this at any time within his Epistle, he apparently saw no connection between the points he desired to make and the Eucharistic celebration. It certainly would have been a shock to him to discover that later Christians used his texts to deny the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist. Such people fail to grasp the meaning of his teachings. He is solely concerned with the eternal reality of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, and not its subsequent expressions in time--in the earthly dimension.**

**Abraham appears in the Old Testament as a "corporate symbol." He is one person who represents a group of people. Obviously he represents all those who are his descendants in the flesh. Not so obviously he represents, as Paul teaches and explains, all the faithful people on earth.**

**As Abraham kneels to receive the blessing of Melchizedek, all of his descendants kneel in him--as yet none were born. We know Jacob (called Israel) would come from his son Isaac, and from Jacob would come the twelve sons who would father the Israelite people. Of these twelve sons, one would be Levi from whom would come the Levites who received the priesthood from God. Levi, like Abraham, becomes a corporate symbol of all the Levites.**

**When Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, all Israel paid tithes to him. This included the Levites who, among the Israelites, paid no tithes but received tithes from the rest of the clans. Our author sees the levitical priesthood in its father Abraham, kneeling before Melchizedek for a blessing and likewise giving tithes to him. The two actions of being blessed by another and giving tithes to another doubly signified the superiority of the person who blessed and received the tithes. Melchizedek blessed Abraham and received tithes from him in virtue of his priesthood. The author deduced the levitical priesthood to be inferior to that of the "order of Melchizedek."**

## IMPERFECTION OF THE OLD COVENANT

The author writes:

*See the greatness of this man to whom Abraham the patriarch gave one tenth of his booty! The law provides that the priests of the tribe of Levi should receive tithes from the people, their brother Israelites, even though all of them are descendants of Abraham: but Melchizedek, who was not of their ancestry, received tithes of Abraham and blessed him who had received God's promises. It is indisputable that a lesser person is blessed by a greater. And whereas men subject to death receive tithes, Scripture testifies that this man lives on. Levi, who receives tithes, was, so to speak, tithed in the person of his father, for he was still in his father's loins when Melchizedek met Abraham (Heb. 7:4-10).*

Jewish heritage is passed down through the mother and not the father, but the priesthood is passed down by the father and not the mother.

The writer has demonstrated the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the levitical priesthood by demonstrating the superiority of the priest Melchizedek over the priests of the tribe of Levi. He now moves to show the inferiority of the ministry or the work of the levitical priesthood by comparing it with the ministry of a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Here at this point let us recall the end and goal of religion, as understood in the Old and New Testaments. The end of religion is the reunion of mankind with God. God Himself initiated this union by establishing a covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Through this covenant these people became the People of God--the people most dear to Him of all the earth. For the Jews, this covenant relationship was the heart and essence of religion. The levitical priesthood came into existence as a means to fulfill this covenant relationship. Because sin was the main obstacle to this covenant relationship, the priests became the peoples' representative before God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins (see Heb.5:1). The high priest yearly--on the Day of Atonement--renewed this covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites.

When our author objectively examines the Law of the Covenant, the Torah, it is seen as the means of preserving the covenant relationship. The Torah prescribed all those things necessary for keeping the covenant; it described

those things that violated the covenant; it prescribed the means for reconciliation and reestablishing the covenant when broken. The Torah came into existence for the sole purpose of assisting mankind to obtain union with God. The Torah existed for true worship of True God; therefore Law, for our author, is considered primarily from the aspect of its elimination of sin and the restoration of the proper relationship between God and man.

The author of Hebrews, with great insight, saw the relationship between religious law and worship. Religious laws truly are directives to aid mankind to reach a final and total union with God. Both positive and negative laws serve as guideposts along the journey of faith. Positive laws direct one safely along the right road. Negative laws indicate when one has veered in a wrong direction; to persist upon such a path could mean getting lost and perhaps coming to a disastrous end. St. Thomas of Aquinas said that all true laws were ordinances or directives of right reason. In other words, true laws were the intelligent way for reasonable people to live their lives.

However, when the laws are directives from the Divine Mind, they usually demand a degree of faith in order for people to obey them. Since the light of human reason is limited, the intrinsic goodness of Divine Laws is not always evident to the human mind. The Lord confirmed, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways.*" When our thoughts and ways are out of harmony with the thoughts and ways of God, guess who is going to come out in the wrong? Since God gave human beings minds by which to properly direct their lives, and human obedience should be a personal response, God desires that we behold the intrinsic goodness in His Divine Commands. It is the duty of those who exact obedience of others to demonstrate to their subjects the true goodness involved in their acts of obedience.

We know that "infants in Christ" obey out of fear of going to Hell and of losing Heaven. Since their lives have not risen above the pleasure-pain principle, this is the principle that directs their orientation towards eternity. As such people fail to grow and mature in their interpersonal relationship--whether with God or man--they cannot measure their losses or gains on the personal level. A person more spiritually mature avoids sin, for he or she dreads the loss of God's Presence which means Hell; such persons truly long for union with God which means Heaven.

Perhaps the worst of all are those religious spirits who see religious laws as their means to achieve perfection and obtain Heaven without a personal

encounter with God. Obviously, these spirits avoid any personal encounter with God. They find their means for self-perfection within the law, which produces a self-righteousness of their own. They look not to the mercy of God, but to His justice. They play His game well, keep all the rules, and are therefore winners. *“God is not unjust; he will not forget my work--past and present” (Heb.6:10).*

However, when you really examine what is occurring, you discover that law is being used to avoid a personal relationship with God. The Law of God is used by such people as this to protect themselves from God. Law is used in order to always know the north, south, east, and west of their human existence. They put their trust and faith in Law, not God. They love Law, not God. Law can protect the human spirit from being changed because it can keep God at a distance. They become too busy keeping religious laws to ever become religious.

The Pharisees were accused of worshipping the Torah, not Yahweh. The Torah replaced Yahweh. This is what is known in its full bloom as the spirit of legalism. When this spirit truly incarnates itself in the human spirit, a person can become cold and merciless in dealing with others--especially where there is evident human weakness and socially unacceptable sins.

For all their outward display of religion, legalistic spirits do not love God. When Jesus, Incarnate Love, came to this earth, such spirits despised and rejected him. In so doing they passed judgment on themselves. In despising and rejecting Jesus, they objectively manifested their true heart's attitude toward God of which they were unconsciously unaware. On the conscious level, no one could convict them of sin.

In our own time, so many Catholics could not have been so upset by the changing of Church Laws if this evil spirit of legalism had not infected their souls. What else could account for the hatred so many of them vented against the Church as they went out the door!

The author of Hebrews now asks the questions:

*If, then, perfection had been achieved through the levitical priesthood...what need would there have been to appoint a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, instead of choosing a priest according to the order of Aaron? (Heb.7:11).*

In order to follow the logic of his thought we need to recall that he has in mind the words of Psalm 110 which declares the Messiah to be a high priest. Now this Psalm, attributed to David, appeared long after the establishment of the levitical priesthood. To the mind of the author this implies that perfection could not be achieved within the levitical priesthood. If it could have been, God would have followed His established order and brought Israel to perfection through a high priest from the order of Aaron.

However, as we see from Psalm 110 God appointed a high priest outside of the levitical priesthood--a high priest of a different order. Now since the Torah had been given for the sake of the levitical worship, the author maintains, "*When there is a change of priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law*" (7: 12). If a new priesthood has been established, it seriously would effect the future validity and binding force of the Torah.

The author has already established that Jesus Christ is this designated high priest. He goes on to argue his point:

*Now he of whom these things are said was of a different tribe, none of whose members ever officiated at the altar. It is clear that our Lord rose from the tribe of Judah, regarding which Moses said nothing about priests (Heb. 7:13-14).*

The premise of the author is that if the priesthood has been changed it implies a change of Law. It is obvious he maintains a change has occurred since the Person who did receive the high priesthood did not come from the tribe of Levi, nor did such a priest ever receive any sanction from Moses. He goes on to say that this truth becomes more evident when you realize this new high priest, as acknowledged by the Scriptures, is of the order of Melchizedek. To be designated a high priest of this order signifies an eternal priesthood--a priesthood entirely different from the order of Aaron, in which the high priests must constantly be replaced because of their mortality rate. So our author says:

*The matter is clearer still if another priest is appointed according to the likeness of Melchizedek: one who has become a priest, not in virtue of a law expressed in a commandment concerning physical descent, but in virtue of the power of a life which cannot be*

*destroyed. Scripture testifies: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb.7:15-17) .*

It becomes even more apparent that our author sees Jesus entering into this priesthood after His death. Clothed in eternity with immortality, God designated Jesus Christ high priest after the order of Melchizedek, since Jesus Christ cannot die. Immortality and eternity are two of the essential characteristics of that order of priesthood, as physical descendants and mortality are two of the essential characteristics of the earthly priesthood.

Once having established the reality of this new priesthood and its superiority, the author bravely carries his argument to its logical conclusion. The Torah has been set aside--it is now null and void--it is abrogated. He writes: *"The former commandment has been annulled because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law brought nothing to perfection" (Heb.7:18-19a).*

The word translated annulled is a Greek legal term meaning "to set aside" a law or "nullify" a sentence. In actual practice the law failed to achieve its designated end. It did not make the people holy--it lacked the power to radically change the hearts of people; it never reached the root of sin--it touched only the surface of sin. Man's sinlessness, under the Law, had the depth and permanence of a reflection upon the surface of a still pond.

St. Paul observed, *"The Law was powerless because of its weakening by the flesh" (Rom.8:3).* "The Law," Paul teaches, *"is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom.7:12).* Nevertheless, the Law was imperfect because it could not stimulate and bring people to love. Paul goes on to say, *"It should be obvious that no one is justified in God's sight by the law" (Gal.3:11).* The author rightly makes no distinction between the law and priesthood because it was the law that decreed the priesthood, directed it, and sustained it. If the Law falls, the priesthood and the covenant fall with it.

### A BETTER HOPE

The author saw the negative reasons for annulling the Law, but he also saw the positive reason: *"But a better hope has supervened, and through it we draw near to God" (Heb.7:19).* The foundation of this better hope is the sacrifice of Jesus life and His designation as high priest upon His entrance into Heaven. The word "better," as used by the author, implies "new order"--the new order announced by the Gospel. As Paul preached: *"I mean that God, in Christ, was*

*reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them" (2Cor.5:19).*

The author implies that this new order of priesthood achieves what the old order of priesthood failed to do: it fulfills the true end of religion--union with God. The expression "draw near to God" is used in the Old Testament to signify priestly worship. Leviticus 10:3 describes priests as "those who approach" God. *"Through those who approach me I will manifest my sacredness...I will reveal my glory."* By the use of this expression the author suggests that Christians have become "priestly people" who can draw near to God. However, Christian people must never forget that this drawing near to God can only be through Jesus Christ, our High priest.

### THE NEW PRIEST

The author is not unaware that according to Exodus 29:9, the sons of Aaron had been given a priesthood that would last "forever." That promise had been annulled "because of weakness and uselessness." The priesthood of Jesus Christ had also been given forever. May that priesthood also one day be annulled? The author holds that this cannot be, as the priesthood of Jesus Christ "has been confirmed by an oath." This was not true of the former priesthood:

*The priests of the old covenant became priests without an oath, unlike Jesus to whom God said: "The Lord swore, and he will not repent [change his heart]: 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Heb.7:21).*

Because of the permanence of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, Jesus becomes the guarantee of the new order of relationship established between mankind and God. The author implies that if the priesthood and the law have been set aside, then the old covenant has ended and a New Covenant has been inaugurated. He writes, *"Thus has Jesus become the guarantee of a better covenant" (Heb.7:22).*

The New Covenant is "better" because it primarily rests upon Jesus the High Priest. It is a covenant the Father has established with Jesus Christ. It is not a covenant in which the Father once again enters into a covenant relationship with sinful humanity, but a covenant He enters into with His beloved Son who "remains forever." It is a covenant relationship eternally founded. Mankind's



entrance into this covenant comes only through Jesus Christ. Truly, no one goes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. Our author observes:

*Under the old covenant there were many priests because they were prohibited by death from remaining in office; but Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood which does not pass away (Heb. 7:23-24).*

In this new covenant there is one High Priest because Jesus the High Priest remains forever. When the author speaks of Jesus as having “a priesthood which does not pass away,” he implies a continuous priestly activity on the part of Jesus. He does not limit the priestly act of Jesus to the sacrifice of the Cross. Nor does he limit Jesus’ sacrifice to His death on the Cross.

For our author, Jesus’ entrance into heaven was the climactic moment of His sacrifice; therefore, the sacrifice of Jesus cannot be limited solely to the Cross as a thing of the past. In heaven there is no time sequential. The sacrifice of Jesus assumes an eternal dimension, what began on earth is not completed on earth but is carried into eternity where it has no end. The language our author uses suggests that this sacrifice is continually presented or offered. He writes to his readers: “*Therefore he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them*” (Heb. 7:25).

## THE NEW MINISTRY

Here the great work of Jesus’ priesthood in Heaven is revealed. Paul speaks of Jesus “*who is at the right hand of God and who intercedes for us*” (Rom. 8:34). The author speaks of His saving activity, not as something of the past, but as something continuing on into eternity. No limits or qualifications are put on Jesus’ ability to save sinners who approach God through Him. For this reason Paul says, “*Jesus Christ Our Hope!*” In the mind of our author, Jesus works in eternity. He gives the greatest service possible to His earthly brothers and sisters—“He forever lives to make intercession for them.” In later Judaism, expiatory sacrifice was regarded as “intercession.” Did the author have this concept in mind? If so, he is implying that the sacrifice of Jesus has its continuing consequences in heaven. This would certainly militate against certain Christian theologians and teachers who maintain that the work of the atonement, Jesus’ death on the Cross, is regarded as over and past! It gives renewed meaning to the use of the crucifix within the Christian Church.

Our author has presented Jesus Christ as the New High Priest. For a moment he desires his readers gaze and contemplate this New High Priest and note the differences between the old and new models. Not until suffering had completed its work within Jesus was He designated High Priest by God: *“And when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, designated as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”*

Previously our author enumerated the qualities of the earthly high priest:

*Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was (Heb.5:1-5)*

Speaking of Jesus and thinking of the work God called him to accomplish he wrote: *“Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory God should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb.2:10).*

What comparison is there between the earthly and the heavenly? What comparison is there between Jesus who was *“once tempted in every way”* and who *“when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears to God,”* and the High Priest Jesus Christ in heavenly glory? A High Priest Willed by God and perfected through obedience to God. The author now writes:

*It was fitting that we should have such a high priest [so in keeping with the love of God]: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens (Heb. 7: 26).*

No longer beset with weakness--there is no longer a need for tears or cries. He has taken His seat at the right hand of glory in the fullness of His perfection. There in Heaven, Jesus is removed from all the evil and contamination of this world--nothing can ever alter those permanent characteristics of His priesthood: a holiness that gives Him eternal access and acceptance to God, and innocence in which not a vestige of evil, not a dust of it, clings to Him. Here innocence does not imply ignorance about sin. Jesus knew more about sin than any sinner. Of such innocence Father Judge told his lay apostles:

*You will move among the things of the world in charity without contamination. You are to be like the sunshine that moves and splashes in dirty places and is never soiled. You are a light in dark places...(Fr. Thomas A. Judge to Cenacle members).*

Jesus is a high priest uncontaminated even by a breath of sin from the past and now removed from the possibility of any future contamination--separated from sinners, higher than the heavens.

Comparing the priests of the two different orders, the author says:

*For the law sets up as high priests men who are weak, but the word of the oath which came after the law appoints as priest the Son, made perfect forever (Heb.7:28).*

Our author cannot but compare the sacrifice offered by the New High Priest with that of the old. He reflects that constant sacrifice had to be made because of the sinful condition, not only of the people, but of the high priest. The imperfections of those sacrifices are evident from the fact that they could not effect any permanent status of holiness among the People of God. The author reflects:

*Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people: he did that once for all when he offered himself (Heb.7:27).*

For the first time he mentions the sacrifice of the New High Priest: "He offered himself." It was a sacrifice that demanded self-oblation.

The author now desires to develop the ministry of the New High Priest, where this ministry is enacted, and what this ministry entails. He certainly pictures the New High Priest involved in an active ministry--even if seated. As is his custom, the writer reflects back upon the Old Testament account. There he will find the pattern and the prefiguring of the perfect and eternal ministry.

Bringing his readers back to earth reminds him to emphasize that the ministry of Jesus is heavenly and not earthly:

*The main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the*

*Majesty in heaven, minister of the sanctuary and of that true tabernacle set up, not by man, but by the Lord (Heb.8:1-2).*

He tells his readers that the place of Jesus' ministry is within the heavenly sanctuary. He goes on to say:

*Now every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices~ hence the necessity for this one to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are priests already offering the gifts which the law prescribes (Heb.8:3-4).*

Many scholars believe that just such a statement points to the fact that the Epistle was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. However, others have been quick to point out that the author is not interested in Jewish history as such, but in what appears in the Old Testament.

The author is interested in the laws prescribing ritual worship in the Old Testament. To him, in the old and imperfect lies the copy of the perfect and eternal. He quotes Moses to establish the fact that the old did previously have an eternal pattern from which it was modeled:

*They worship in a copy of the heavenly sanctuary, as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tabernacle. For he says, "See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Heb.8:5).*

The thought of a new sanctuary stimulates the thought of a new ministry. The old sanctuary had been established under the old covenant. As our author indicated, Moses had patterned it upon a vision of the perfect sanctuary. It was into this perfect sanctuary that Jesus entered to minister. The ministry of Jesus within the heavenly sanctuary implied He had become the minister of a New Covenant. He could not be a minister within the Old Covenant because only the levitical priesthood could minister there. Our author writes: "*Jesus has obtained a more excellent ministry now, just as he is mediator of a better covenant, founded on better promises*" (Heb.8:6).

Our writer not only tells us that Jesus is the minister within the New Covenant but He is the Mediator of "a better covenant." The Greek word for mediator is *mesites*, which comes from *mesos*, meaning in the middle. The mediator is the one who stands in the middle of two people and brings them

together. Being both divine and human, Jesus has become the perfect Mediator between God and man. Our author implies the blessings and benefits of this “better covenant” will come to mankind only through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

The writer knew that the ministry of the Jewish high priest flowed from the fact that a covenant relationship had been established between God and the Israelites. The ministry of the levitical priesthood was to implement the covenant. This ministry is tied firmly with the covenant. Therefore, in the logical mind of the author, if the ministry has been changed because it was of itself “weak and useless,” it certainly reflects upon the covenant it served. He rightly deduces that a new ministry and a new priesthood implies a New Covenant. He writes, *“If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no place for a second one” (Heb.8:7).*

The author found, in the words of Jeremiah, Yahweh’s criticism of the old covenant and the promise of a “better covenant” would come to be. He quotes at length the words spoken by Jeremiah (31:31-34). Yahweh, through Jeremiah, speaks these words of consolation to Israel on the eve of great national disaster. Israel is about to go into captivity and exile. Great evil has fallen upon Israel because the people turned from Yahweh, but out of this evil Yahweh will bring a greater blessing. The author writes:

*But God, finding fault with them, says: “Days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; For they broke my covenant and I grew weary of them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will place my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach their fellow citizens or their brothers, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know me, from least to greatest. I will forgive their evildoing, and their sins I will remember no more” (Heb.8:8-12).*

God assures Israel that when the trials and sufferings of exile and captivity have completed their work, the divine plan of love will be brought to perfection and completion within a new relationship with God, founded on grace, not law. For a time they will experience humiliation, but it is to be a

cause of great hope. In this “better Covenant” God does not require from His People but gives to them.

The end of the New Covenant will be the same as the old--to form a People truly the Lord's. The Laws of the Old Covenant were fixed and external--symbolized by being written on tablets of stone. The Law of the New Covenant will be internal and spiritual. God will write His Will in the hearts of His People: it will become part of their personalities leading to continuous growth and development. Within the New Covenant all will be brought into a personal encounter with God--the experience of God will be personal. There will be no need for someone to teach another about God. As an end result, all sin will be left far behind the lives of all--not even the memory will remain. The author logically deduces that with the coming of the new that the old must go. He writes: *“When he says, ‘a new covenant,’ he declares the first one obsolete. And what has become obsolete and has grown old is close to disappearing (Heb.8:13).*

The New Testament pointedly observes that the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross inaugurated the New Covenant, as is made clear from the Last Supper accounts. It was the day of its beginning. The failures of the Old Covenant dramatically culminated in the “People of God” destroying the life of the Word of God. Out of these ashes, so to speak, rises the New Covenant. From the most terrible of all evils--an evil that symbolized all evil and its fullness, “the death of God,”--rises the greatest of all good, the New Covenant eternally sealed in the Blood of the Lamb.

## CHAPTER 7

### OBEDIENCE SAVES

#### INTRODUCTION

Yahweh, speaking through the prophet Malachi, foretold, *“But you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays” (Heb.3:20)*. For the author of Hebrews, Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy through His sacrificial death upon the Cross, which brought the gifts of healing and righteousness. The obedience of Jesus Christ unto the shedding of His Blood on the Cross made atonement for mankind. His obedience unto death healed and mended the breach caused by willful disobedience. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, *“He pardoned all our sins. He canceled the bond that stood against us with all its claims, snatching it up and nailing it to the cross” (Col.2:13c-14)* We read in first Peter: *“In his own body he brought your sins to the cross, so that all of us, dead to sin, could live in accord with God’s will” (1Pt.2:24)*.

Jesus was simultaneously the Corporate Symbol of mankind and the Victim for the sins of mankind. Great as this may all be, it is but the means to the end. If the Blood of Christ purifies the human spirit of sin it is for the purpose of religion, in order that mankind can render the service of worship that glorifies the Lord, so that mankind can make the total surrender that results in union with God. Jesus Christ, by His death, inaugurated the New Covenant to make possible the goal of true religion. Our author confirms, *“He is the mediator of a better covenant” (Heb.8:6)*. It is a “better covenant” because it is “founded on better promises.” It rests upon the divine oath of God which decreed Jesus Christ High Priest forever. The Book of Hebrews not only presents Jesus as the Victim for sins, but also as the High Priest who offered Himself.

The works of redemption and atonement could not have been done if the New Covenant had not been inaugurated. Jesus could not act in such a priestly capacity under the Old Covenant. Since Jesus Christ has been designated by divine oath as High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, the author says, *“Thus has Jesus become the guarantee of a better covenant” (Heb.7:22)*. *“Yahweh foretold this better covenant through the prophet Jeremiah” (31:31-34)*. The

writer logically concludes:

*If that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no place for a second one... When he says, "a new covenant," he declares the first one obsolete. And what has become obsolete and has grown old is close to disappearing (Heb.8:7,13)*

As the sun rises, the shadows begin to disappear.

For our author, the Old Covenant is even now not without importance. The Old Covenant with its priesthood and ministry is a copy and shadow of the New Covenant. As Yahweh told Moses, "See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (see Heb.8:5 & Ex.25:40).

In order to appreciate more fully the author's deductions, let us review the concept of covenant in the Old Testament. The Greek word *diatheke*, translated "covenant," carries both the idea of contract and will. *Diatheke* expresses more the concept of a covenant being an inheritance received from a benefactor. In order for one to receive an inheritance, generally, the benefactor must first die. As long as the benefactor lives, the will and the designated heir apparent may be changed. In the Old Testament "shedding of blood" became synonymous for death, and we that see blood plays an essential part in the establishment of a covenant.

We find two rituals in the Old Testament for establishing a covenant with Yahweh. The first type we find in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis when Yahweh established a covenant with Abram. In this ritual animals were slain and divided into equal halves. Each half represented the life of one of the contracting parties who presently were divided one from the other. As each person passed through the two halves of the slain victim, they symbolically took on the life of the victim, and the two persons symbolically became one entity and alienation ceased. We read in the Genesis account:

*When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking brazier and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. It was on that occasion that the Lord made a covenant with Abram... (Gn.15:17-18).*

Here we see the life of the victim was sacrificed--its blood shed in order to unify persons previously alienated.



The second example of covenant ritual occurred at Mt. Sinai when Yahweh called Israel into a covenant with Himself. We read in Exodus that Moses constructed an altar in which the people stood at some distance in front of the altar. The relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites had been previously outlined. Yahweh instructed:

*Moses himself was told, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, with Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You shall all worship at some distance, but Moses alone is to come close to the Lord, the others shall not come too near, and the people shall not come up at all with Moses (Ex.24:1-2).*

We see from this that all Israel is called to worship Yahweh but at different distances. There were three grades to be maintained in approaching Yahweh. Before Moses erected the altar he read Yahweh's conditions to the people. He read Yahweh's Will that was necessary for a covenant relationship with Him and for the reception of the covenant blessings. We see that for a covenant to be valid it must primarily be freely entered into by all parties concerned. They must know the conditions of the covenant. As St. Augustine once observed,

*God who made thee without thy consent, will not save thee without thy consent... When the Israelites had understood the conditions of the agreement, they replied: "We will do everything the Lord has told us" (Gn.24:3).*

This obedience and surrender of their wills to Yahweh was another essential element of the covenant relationship. Of course it goes without saying that such a relationship must be initiated by Yahweh. Once the ground work for the Covenant relationship had been laid, it remained to be ratified. At this point Moses erected the altar which represented Yahweh. Exodus relates that Moses then sprinkled the blood of the Covenant on the people, saying, *"This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his" (Ex.24:8).* The life's blood of the victims sealed the covenant. It made the Israelites one with Yahweh to such a degree that Yahweh considered them as Himself--as His own children.

The covenant lasted as long as the agreement was kept. Any breaking of the agreement destroyed the covenant and forfeited the promised blessings. The covenant primarily existed for worship: *"You shall all worship at some distance."* Yahweh considered the weakness of the human being entering into

a relationship with Him. It is one thing to give mental assent to an agreement, and another thing to live out the agreement. Yahweh established the levitical priesthood as a means for the preservation of the Covenant. The priests as representatives of the people were *“to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins”* (Heb.5:1).

It may be asked, why did these ritual sacrifices have the power to seal a covenant and cause unity between divided persons? If we think with the mind of our author, the answer becomes obvious. What occurred in time were shadows and types of an eternal reality. They were symbols and representations of the perfect sacrifice of God’s Son on the Cross. Those sacrifices foreshadowed this sacrifice and presently drew their power from it. However, those covenants await final ratification at Jesus’ actual death upon the Cross.

Since the blood of the sacrificial victims was but a shadow of the Blood of Christ, it only possessed the power to purify the surface. Since the death of Jesus had not actually occurred, those previous covenants could be annulled by the testator and new heirs appointed. In actual fact, the covenant with Abraham was ratified, and that with Israel nullified. In the daily routine practices of their religion, the Jews seemed to forget the purposes of sacrifice. Their ritual purity became an end in itself. Yahweh sought to correct the abuses through the prophets: *“For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts”* (Hos.6:6).

Samuel said: *“Does the Lord so delight in holocausts and sacrifices as in obedience to the command of the Lord? Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission than the fat of rams”* (1Sam.15:22).

*“Guard your step when you go to the house of God. Let your approach be obedience, rather than the fools’ offering of sacrifice; for they know not how to keep from doing evil”* (Eccl.4:17).

The author of Hebrews stated: *“The former commandment has been annulled because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law brought nothing to perfection”* (Heb.7:18-19).

It may be asked, how could the Law established by Yahweh be set aside for imperfection? The author would answer because it was but an earthly copy of the heavenly reality. It was all shadows and no substance. Others have

answered that Yahweh established a relationship that Israel could bear at the time. They were a primitive people, recently released from slavery, religiously immature, greatly affected by their environment of polytheism. The Law had the imperfection of the beginnings of spiritual development. At its best it preserved knowledge of the True God in the world.

In the mind of Paul, the Law did not fail. The Law in itself was good and just, but it was never given with the purpose of making men holy. Law was given to produce a sense of sin and evil within the conscious awareness of people. When the Law came to objectively distinguish between good and evil, it forced upon man a conscious awareness of personal sins. According to the norms of goodness and perfection, as outlined by the Law, people came to realistically measure the personal rebellion, disobedience, and evil in their own lives. Paul insisted the purpose of the Law was to bring mankind to the conscious realization of its need to be saved--to awareness that the world needed a Savior. The Law was meant to prepare men to accept the salvation coming through Jesus Christ.

### THE OLD WORSHIP

The writer desires to draw a comparison between the worship of the Old and New Covenants. Worship within the Old Covenant was centered on the Tabernacle. All of the author's references would be to the worship in the desert, not in the temple at Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for tabernacle generally signified "habitation, dwelling." While in the desert, the tabernacle was housed in a tent. This tent was referred to as the "tent of meeting" for here Israel could encounter Yahweh. It was also called the "tent of witness." The "witness" was a reference to the Ten Commandments which revealed the Will of Yahweh to Israel.

The actual tabernacle would have been the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the two stone tablets of the Commandments. Since these expressed the Will of God, they expressed His personal Presence. *Ark* literally means box. The Ark was believed to be the actual place of Yahweh's dwelling with Israel. The Ark always remained closed. God could only be approached as far as the lid of the Ark and this only rarely. What touched the Ark or tabernacle was considered to be touching the Lord. When the Ark was being brought to Jerusalem, a man named Uzzah reached out to steady it and was struck dead for his efforts (see 2Sam.6:6-7). Therefore, the Ark symbolized the Presence of Yahweh for Israel--His holiness, His hiddenness, and His accessibility under

certain well regulated and guarded conditions. We are taught that Yahweh reveals Himself in the degree and the manner He Wills; if man desires communication with God, it must be in compliance with God's Will.

The construction of the Sanctuary and the worship prescribed expressed, in a concrete fashion, divine worship as demanded by Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. There we saw that Moses had close access to God. In the levitical priesthood the high priest cautiously assumed the role of Moses once a year. The author observes, "*The first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary.*" As mentioned, these regulations and sanctuary were patterned upon Moses' vision. The Sanctuary itself consisted of two parts: an outer section called the Holy Place, and the inner sanctuary called the Holy of Holies wherein rested the Ark of the Covenant, which was entirely covered with gold. As already mentioned, the golden lip of the Ark was known as the *apporet* or the "propitiatory." This was the place of atonement and thus called the "mercy seat" (see Exodus chapters 25, 26, 27).

Within the first sanctuary, the Holy Place, the priest ministered for the people. Here stood the all gold lampstands, with seven branches that were to be kept burning at all times (the Sanctuary Lamp), and the table with the plates of pure gold that held the showbread--twelve loaves of bread shown or displayed on a table. These represented the twelve tribes of Israel and their desire for their yearly supply of bread. Israel prayed not for its daily bread but its yearly bread. Philo taught that the lamp represented the heavens before the Lord. Under pain of death the priests were forbidden to go beyond the Holy Place (Nm.18:3-7). They had exclusive charge of the outer sanctuary and daily discharged their religious duties. Lay people were forbidden under pain of death to enter into the Holy Place. They must remain outside of the Tent.

The author writes,

*Behind the second veil was the tabernacle called the holy of holies, in which were the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant entirely covered with gold. In the ark were the golden jar containing the manna, the rod of Aaron which had blossomed, and the tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the place of expiation. We cannot speak now of each of these in detail (Heb.9:3-5).*

These words of the author have caused some difficulty because it is known the golden altar of incense could not have been in the Holy of Holies because priests ministered daily at this altar. Some believe the accounts possessed by the author were vague, and he possibly confused certain elements. We find no other Scriptural reference to the fact that the Ark contained a gold jar of manna or the rod of Aaron. In the Septuagint version of the Bible there is mention of a gold jar of manna within the sanctuary but not within the Ark. However, there is no mention of this in the Hebrew version of the Bible.

These could be an example of Old Testament traditions surviving down to our author's day. The rod of Aaron which sprouted had been a miraculous sign of Aaron's exclusive right to the priesthood (Nm.17:1-11). We know from Deuteronomy 10:5 that the Ten Commandments were kept within the Ark. According to 1 Kings 8:9, these were the only things to be kept within the Ark.

The Ark itself was a chest of acacia wood measuring 4 feet long, 2 1/2 feet high. Above the Ark were the "Cherubim of the Glory." From the description in Exodus 25:18-20, these were two Cherubs made of gold, and were all one piece with the propitiatory--the place of expiation--apparently attached to the kapporet. The images faced each other and their wings overshadowed the Ark. Their presences suggested the Presence of Yahweh. They were called "cherubim of glory" because glory was synonymous for God. Obviously these images did not violate the first commandment concerning graven images. It is not the making of images that is forbidden, but the making of images to be worshipped as God. The author goes on to comment:

*These were the arrangements for worship. In performing their service the priests used to go into the outer tabernacle constantly, but only the high priest went into the inner one, and that but once a year, with the blood which he offered for himself and for the sins of the people (Heb.9:6-7).*

Actually the high priest entered three times on the day of Atonement. He entered with fear and trepidation recalling Yahweh's words to Moses:

*Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the propitiatory on the ark; otherwise, when I reveal myself in a cloud above the propitiatory, he will die (Lv.16:2).*

Only after lengthy preparation that made him consciously aware of his own sinfulness did he enter the Holy of Holies--apparently humility being the only safe avenue of approach to Yahweh. All this symbolized mankind's relationship with God under the Old Covenant. It was worship of God, with fear, at a good distance. The Holy Spirit taught through this means that man had no free access to God. Our author writes: "*The Holy Spirit was showing thereby that while the first tabernacle was still standing, the way into the sanctuary had not yet been revealed*" (Heb.9:8). It also implied that the ritual worship of the Old Covenant did not truly purify the Israelites, and, as spiritual lepers, they must keep their distance from Yahweh. Our author writes:

*This is a symbol of the present time, in which gifts and sacrifices are offered that can never make perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but can only cleanse in matters of food and drink and various ritual washings: regulations concerning the flesh, imposed until the time of the new order (Heb.9:9-10).*

#### THE HEAVENLY SANCTUARY

For our author, the new order began with the death of Jesus. He proceeds to describe the ministry of the New High Priest:

*But when Christ came as high priest of the good things which have come to be, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation (Heb.9:11).*

It may be asked what is this greater and more perfect tabernacle into which Jesus Christ has entered? It is the general opinion of the early Fathers of the Church that this "*greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, not belonging to this creation*" is the Resurrected Body of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ entering into His divine glory in which His earthly body becomes glorified. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

*What is sown is ignoble, what rises is glorious... A natural body is put down and a spiritual body comes up...the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit...the man of heaven (1Cor.15:42ff).*

The Fathers also held that by our incorporation into Christ through baptism, the members of the Church have entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. However, the author's words do not give the impression that the Christian Community, here and now, has full access to God. Jesus' sacrifice and ministry pertain to the "world to come." He has pointedly stated that Christians on earth have "*tasted the heavenly gift...tasted the powers of the age to come*" (Heb.6:4,5). The author stresses the distinction between the old and the new cultic ritual:

*He entered, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, and achieved eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself up unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb.9:12-14).*

Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood symbolizes His death. He gave His life to be the Mediator between God and mankind. Jesus becomes the "meeting tent" in which God and man can be one. Jesus is atonement and, as such, Jesus achieved eternal redemption. If shadows of eternal reality removed the surface of sin, what must be the depths of purification that flow from the personal sacrifice of the unblemished Jesus Christ who offered up His life through His eternal Spirit? That is what the author of Hebrews asks. This reference to the "eternal Spirit" implies that the Son's divine personality offers His own sacred humanity for sacrifice. Such a completely divine personal sacrifice had the power to enter into the depths of the human heart, into the depths of human conscience and purify it of the depths of sin, leaving a person free "to worship the living God"--to fulfill His Will.

Our author explains why Jesus Christ has become the mediator of a New Covenant. In so doing, he also stresses that sins under the Law could not be ignored. As man had broken these commandments, man had an obligation to make amends. The amends under the Old Covenant were inadequate because they were impersonal. When Jesus personally made amends for all the transgressions against the Law, He personally redeemed those under the Law and made it possible for them "to receive the promised eternal inheritance"--eternal life. The author speaks of "deliverance," and this means "redemption." Mankind was set free from its past burden of sin by the death

of Jesus. This death ratified the New Covenant which gave mankind the opportunity for a new life in God--a new life in which divine support would be eternally available. Mankind could now reach the end for which it was created. Our author says:

*This is why he is mediator of a new covenant: since his death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions committed under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Heb.9:15).*

The writer emphasizes that the Christian inheritance flows from a covenant ratified by the death of Jesus. His death made it final and eternal:

*Where there is a testament, it is necessary that the death of the testator be confirmed. For a testament [will] comes into force only in the case of death; it has no force while the testator is alive (Heb.9:16-17).*

He clarifies this point by saying:

*Not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. When Moses had read all the commandments of the law of the people, he took the blood of goats and calves, together with water and crimson wool and hyssop, and sprinkled the book and all the people saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has enjoined upon you." He also sprinkled the tabernacle and all the vessels of worship with blood. According to the law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb.9:18-22).*

All this, he implies, is in keeping with the Divine Plan. Even though the author puts great emphasis on blood, we should keep in mind that it is not blood itself that is being emphasized, but the life of Jesus that was sacrificed. The blood symbolized the death of Jesus. He clearly stated in verse fifteen that the death of Jesus brought redemption.

### A SUPERIOR SACRIFICE

Our author stresses the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Since His death effected a work far superior to the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, it is



by far a more superior sacrifice. Jesus Christ appears in the heavenly sanctuary and, it is probably implied, before the Presence of God. This does not militate against Jesus' own Body being the heavenly sanctuary. It would be but a different way of looking at the same reality. Jesus Christ appears in the heavenly sanctuary as the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. His sacrificed life appears before God as an eternal offering for the sins of mankind. It is a sacrifice that can never be repeated since death is a final act. Furthermore, at His death, the human nature of Jesus assumed immortality and could never suffer or die again. As our author writes:

*For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a mere copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself that he might appear before God now on our behalf. Not that he might offer himself there again and again, as the high priest enters year after year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; if that were so, he would have had to suffer death over and over from the creation of the world (Heb.9:24-26a).*

However, there is no necessity for this, for the sacrifice of Jesus has completed the end for which sacrifice was instituted:

*But now he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sins once for all by his sacrifice. Just as it is appointed that men die once, and after death be judged, so Christ was offered up once to take away the sins of many (Heb.9:26b-28a).*

The word "many" can express the concept of "all." The author implies here that the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient to take away the sins of all mankind. In other words, no one is not covered by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is no need for another sacrifice. The author emphasizes the universality of Jesus' sacrifice and its effects when he tells his readers that when He comes again it will not be to take away sins: "*He will appear a second time not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him*" (9:28b). At that moment the "age to come" will fully be, and faithful Christians will enter into the fullness of the covenant relationship. And then "*they shall not teach their fellow citizens or their brothers, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from least to greatest*" (Heb.8:11).

Perhaps some could continue to believe in the advantage of having a ritual system that offered repeated sacrifices for atonement. The author continues to

stress the superiority of the sacrifice of the New Covenant over the Old. He argues that the very fact of repetitious sacrifice in the Old Covenant demonstrates the inadequacy of its ritual sacrifice:

*Since the law had only a shadow of the good things to come, and no real image of them, it was never able to perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices offered continually year after year. Were matters otherwise, the priests would have stopped offering them, for the worshipers, once cleansed, would have had no sin on their conscience. But through those sacrifices there came only a yearly recalling of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take sins away (Heb.10:1-4).*

It is not enough that a religion offer the means for the removal of sins, it must also perfect the believers' relationship with God. The sacrifices of the Old Covenant could not touch the human will. They could not produce an in-depth cleansing in which the worshipers "once cleansed, would have had no sin on their conscience." In regard to the sins of the conscience, the feast of the Atonement only called them to mind. It created a deeper sense of guilt, which people had to live with year-in and year-out. Such a sense of guilt only encouraged man's separation from God and stressed the enmity between them. The woman of the Gospel who touched the hem of Jesus' garment symbolized life under the Old Covenant--always seeking a cure, exhausting all one's means, and still remaining sick and an outcast from religious society.

It was a human being who fell away from God, and nothing less than a human being could bring them back to God. Our author observed, "*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take sins a way.*" It is for this reason Jesus "offered himself." Our author centers his readers' attention upon the true nature of Jesus' sacrifice. It was the exercise of freedom of will that caused sin and all subsequent sins. Through the avenue of free will man traveled away from God and into a sinful existence. It could only be through the avenue of human will that man could make his journey back to God and into a loving relationship with Him. This is the journey Jesus took. St. Luke saw it as the Journey to Jerusalem. Our author finds confirmation for this truth in Psalm 40:7-8 and 1Samuel 15:22. He writes:

*Wherefore, on coming into the world, Jesus said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me~  
Holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in. Then I said, 'As*

*is written of me in the book, I have come to do your will, O God.”* First he says, *“Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in.”* These are offered according to the prescriptions of the law. Then he says, *“I have come to do your will.”* In other words, he takes away the first covenant to establish the second (Heb. 10:5-9).

These words are presented as being spoken by the pre-existing Son of God prior to the Incarnation. They reveal on the one hand God’s reason for sending the Son into the world and on the other hand God’s displeasure with the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

The New Covenant has been established to do God’s Will. The life of Jesus perfectly accomplished this Will: *“He was known to be in human estate and it was thus he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross”* (Phil.2:8). Our author points to the “will” of Christ as the place where true sacrifice was enacted and where true atonement occurred and redemption achieved. *“By this ‘will’ we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”* (Heb.10:10). As the waters of a river flow into the sea, the Will of Jesus flows perfectly into the Will of God and it will never alter its course. What God desired and demanded of mankind came to be in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus received all the covenant blessings and graces. Therefore, He became the Mediator of all these blessings and graces.

### HIS WORK COMPLETED

The writer suggests the completion of Christ’s sacrifice by speaking of Christ now seated at the right hand of God. In the Old Testament a priest always stood before the Lord. Jesus now entered into His rest because His work in creation had been completed. Nevertheless, His work as Intercessor continues for that is His work in the heavenly sanctuary. However, the work on earth has not been completed. This our author implies when he states, *“Now he waits until his enemies are placed beneath his feet”* (Heb.10:13). Apparently, this work on earth must be done before the Church can enter into its rest. When this is accomplished Christ will return to earth *“to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.”* The author sums up the completion of Jesus’ work in these words: *“By one offering he has forever perfected those who are being sanctified”* (Heb.10:14). This signifies the work of salvation has been completed. The threefold consequence of sin--debt, bondage, alienation—has

its remedy in the death of Jesus, which brings forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation.

Not only have sins been forgiven, but those who “are being sanctified” are assured perfection. All graces flow from the death of Jesus. Even though the work of our own perfection cannot be accomplished without our willed cooperation, it could not be accomplished at all unless Jesus had healed us and bestowed upon us the power to grow in the Image of God. The only Image of God upon which human beings may pattern themselves is the Image projected in and through the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Ikon of the Holy Spirit! He is the pattern displayed upon the mountain top: “*See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain*” (Heb.8:5c).

People who desire to enter into the heavenly sanctuary must pattern themselves upon this perfect and eternal human being--the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. They must “learn of” Him; they must “put on the Mind of Christ.” The author speaks of Christians as “being sanctified.” This implies that becoming holy is an ongoing process. “Being sanctified” implies being made acceptable and available for union with God, wherein lies the perfection of holiness, wherein lies religious perfection--the end of the road for a truly religious life.

It may be asked through what concrete means does a person come to an Image of Christ and therefore come to holiness and perfection. Speaking of Jesus Christ our author observed, “*He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*” (5:9). One can experience saving grace, taste the good things of the “age to come” and still not achieve eternal salvation. The New Covenant came into existence through the obedience of Christ to the Will of the Father. Obedience saves! No one can enter into the blessings of the New Covenant except through their willed commitment to obedience. No one can come to the eternal possession of these blessings unless he or she perseveres in obedience. Many Christians dangerously fantasize about salvation and spread their delusions around as Christian doctrines. The full light of the Scriptures will destroy those delusions, true light will dissipate them.

Some parents make their children so paranoid with fear that they become afraid to move in the world. They retard and even destroy life by an over-emphasis of the dangers of life. On the other extreme we can have those who imprudently see no danger to life at all. They neither forewarn nor forearm their children for the deadly and lethal things of life. One cannot, in this life,

drink and pick up everything. Children must be warned not to drink Drano or pick up a rattlesnake. A good mother recently cautioned her five year old son not to go with strangers. After her detailed instructions she asked, "Now Brian, you wouldn't go with a stranger, would you?" He replied, "No, Mommie!" But he added as an afterthought, "Not unless he smiled at me."

In the book, Wise Blood, one false teacher encourages one false prophet, "Keep religion sweet. You've got to sweeten it up if you want to sell it." To "sell it" meant to make it pleasing and profitable. The Scriptures present the balanced view. We do hear siren songs sung in the Christian Community that encourage moral laxity and sinfulness in the name of the "Good God."

We need to keep in mind that the song of salvation has two stanzas. One sings of God's love for mankind and the other sings of mankind's reciprocal and responsive love for God that only concretely expresses itself in obedience to the will of God. In order to be saved, a person must not only wish for and desire salvation, but a person must also be saved as a human being which implies salvation must be a willed decision on the person's part.

The person that wills the end, wills the means to the end. The end is love of God, and obedience is the means to love. Sanctification and perfection are certainly a work of divine grace--but grace that bears the good fruit of docility to the Will of God. As the Holy Spirit testifies, "*This is the covenant I will make with them after those days--I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds.*" "All those who obey him" will have entered into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. The great blessing of the Covenant will be theirs: "*Their sins and their transgressions I will remember no more*" (10:17).

Our author concludes that for such persons, the Old Covenant has nothing to offer; it has become obsolete: "*Once these have been forgiven, there is no further offering for sin*" (10:18). Since "there is no further offering for sin" the author realizes how important it is for people to remain committed to Jesus Christ. To separate oneself from Jesus Christ could be disastrous.

Our author again balances the picture. He has spoken beautifully of the mercy that comes to us through Jesus Christ. He now speaks of the justice of God that awaits those who, in this world, reject God's Mercy--Jesus Christ. Once again he speaks of the sin of apostasy, those who willfully turn from Jesus Christ. He writes:

*If we sin willfully after receiving the truth, there remains for us no further sacrifice for sin--only a fearful expectation of judgment and a flaming fire to consume the adversaries of God. Anyone who rejects the law of Moses is put to death without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Do you not suppose that a much worse punishment is due the man who disdains the Son of God, thinks the covenant-blood by which he was sanctified to be ordinary, and insults the Spirit of grace? We know who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," and "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb.10:26-31).*

Apparently the author never heard that he should keep religion "sweet." Seemingly, he was listening to the Holy Spirit instead and so presented the "balanced" picture.

When Jesus died, the Gospel relates, the curtain before the Holy of Holies was ripped apart. *"Once again Jesus cried out in a loud voice, and then gave up his spirit. Suddenly the curtain of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mt.27:50-51).* The author of Hebrews perfectly interprets for Christians what this signified and its importance to them:

*Brothers, since the blood of Jesus assures our entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living path he has opened up for us through the veil (the "veil" meaning his flesh), and since we have a great priest who is over the house of God, let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust... (Heb.10:19-22a).*

A door to God has been opened through Jesus Christ, and it is the only door we should dare enter. As we pass through this door of union in faith and love, through obedience to Jesus, we find not only ritual purity but the redemption and sanctification of our entire person--we become a people acceptable to God, *"...our hearts sprinkled clean from the evil which lay on our conscience and our bodies washed in pure water" (Heb.10:22b).*

The words of the author of Hebrews echoes the thoughts of St. Paul: *"There is no condemnation now for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rm.8:1).*

Christians are urged to remain faithful to their profession of faith in Jesus Christ and to an active membership within the Christian Community because they cannot be separated one from the other. Active membership implies an active care and concern for the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters in

**Christ. Once again our author stresses the vital importance of membership in the Christian Community in order for individuals to persevere in their Christian commitment:**

*We must consider how to rouse each other to love and good deeds. We should not absent ourselves from the assembly, as some do, but encourage one another, and this all the more because you see that the Day draws near (Heb.10:24-25).*

**The story is told that a nun wrote to St. Bernard about her intention to become a hermit and asked his advice. St. Bernard responded by saying, “If you are a virgin, you are either an imprudent virgin or you are a wise virgin. If you are an imprudent virgin, you need the Christian Community. If you are a wise virgin, the Christian Community needs you!”**

**To come to the end of one’s life separated from Christ, in the mind of the author, is the greatest evil that could befall a Christian. As he contemplates the possibility of such an ending, he can only shake his head and sadly say, “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb.10:31).**

**And we may add--it is an even more fearful thing to fall *out* of the Hands of the living God!**

## CHAPTER 8

### FIDELITY TO CHRISTIAN FAITH

#### INTRODUCTION

From our study of Sacred Scripture we know supernatural faith is never purely an assent of the mind to the truths of Divine revelation, but rather, faith involves a complete personal response to the Person of God who reveals. People express faith by having confidence in God's loving Presence which leads to trusting their lives to God. Faith truly rooted in the human spirit expresses itself in fidelity and faithfulness to God's commands. Lives merely giving verbal assent to divine truths are not lives of faith. Such lives provoked this response from Jesus: *"This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me"* (Mk.7:6). True faith finds expression in obedience to the Will of God. Disobedience always carries a vote of no confidence and no trust in God. The words applied by the author to Jesus express well the true spirit of faith: *"As it is written of me in the book, I have come to do your will, O God."* (Heb.10:7). To persevere in faith is the virtue of fidelity or faithfulness. When people constantly submit to the Will of God, faith becomes fidelity.

For the author of Hebrews, faithfulness issues forth in salvation. Faithfulness saves! As he wrote earlier: *"Do not grow lazy, but imitate those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises"* (Heb.6:12). To the mind of the author, faith without obedience is a delusion. Faithfulness is the day-by-day surrender to the Will of God. From the Gospel of John we see Jesus expected His disciples to place the same quality of faith in Him as they place in the Heavenly Father: *"Have faith in God and faith in me"* (Jn.14:1).

Christian Discipleship therefore demands fidelity to Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews clearly understood this, and he notes that the past lives of his readers demonstrated a heroic faithfulness. He recalls the earlier days of their Christian lives and the fidelity displayed by them in a time of religious persecution. Apparently, shortly after their baptism in the faith, a public persecution broke out against Christians, during which time the readers suffered because of their public profession of Faith, and also for their own public behavior at the time of persecution.



During the first three hundred years of the life of the Church the secular government inaugurated official persecutions against the Church. Christians became the objects of state persecution. It became legal to inflict sufferings and death upon people who professed the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Such times always stimulate the baser elements of society.

Unfortunately many people love to hate, and they hate to love. These times give such people the legal opportunity to express the evilness within themselves against other people. When any group of people loses the protection of the law, they will become the prey of perverse people who heap upon their victims what the law allows or the controlling elements that society will tolerate. This may range from verbal abuse, pillaging and destruction of property, and even bodily harm to the point of death. In Nero's persecution, Christians became human torches to light public parks.

In our own day we have seen the horrible extent and evilness of religious persecution in the example of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. The writer says of his readers that they not only suffered verbal scorn and physical abuse, but they themselves even went a step beyond. They bravely associated themselves with those publicly condemned for being Christians, sharing in their sufferings, and thereby suffered a substantial loss of material possessions. It was not uncommon for mobs to pillage the houses of condemned Christians and those known to be Christians. Our author writes:

*Recall the days gone by when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to insult and trial; at other times you associated yourselves with those who were being so dealt with. You even joined in the sufferings of those who were in prison and joyfully assented to the confiscation of your goods, knowing that you had better and more permanent possessions (Heb.10:32-34).*

We read in Acts that, after the death of Stephen, a persecution broke out in Jerusalem: "After that Saul began to harass the church. He entered house after house, dragged men and women out, and threw them into jail" (Acts 8:3). He himself later confessed that he imprisoned those who believed in Jesus and flogged them in every synagogue (Acts 22:19). He stated before King Agrippa:

*I sent many of God's holy people to prison. When they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them. Many a time, in*

*synagogue after synagogue, I compelled them by force to blaspheme. Indeed, so wild was my fury against them that I pursued them even to foreign cities (Acts 26: 10-11).*

We know that as a result of this persecution the Christians in Jerusalem dispersed and scattered abroad. We read: *“The members of the church who had been dispersed went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). Those in the community who had been dispersed by the persecution that arose because of Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, making the message known... (Acts 11:19).* As we can see, many Christians were forced to become refugees and leave their homes and worldly goods behind.

Our author writes that the readers *“joyfully assented to the confiscation of [their] goods.”* This *“joyfully assented”* may be difficult for many in our society to understand. To possess property is a natural right. Property often becomes an extension of self. In our society it often wrongly becomes the measure of self-worth and esteem. How would a person experience joy in the thought of losing their worldly goods? When they were deprived of them, they did not experience a sense of loss or sadness, but, surprisingly in the Lord, they felt a sense of joy. They experienced a sense of tremendous enrichment instead of impoverishment. They experienced greater joy in their loss than they had experienced pleasure in their possessions. This in itself was a supernatural gift. What had been a loss on the physical level had created a gain on the spiritual level. They experienced true joy in their very own beings-in their sheer existence. This was a treasure no one could rob or diminish. They knew that they had *“better and more permanent possessions.”*

When the Apostles were first beaten by the Sanhedrin for preaching Christ they experienced the same joy. They certainly did not enjoy the prospects of a flogging, nor did they enjoy being beaten. They experienced severe pain on the physical level, but on the spiritual level they surprisingly experienced tremendous joy in the Lord. We read: *“The apostles for their part left the Sanhedrin full of joy that they had been judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Name” (Acts 5:41).*

It is natural to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Those who find pleasure in pain are sick. Those who experience joy in times of religious persecutions are friends of God. The author sees these Christians as men and women in an arena who have won the prize. They have been declared winners. However, the prize is delayed; their winnings have been withheld temporarily. There is

**danger in this situation that they will grow tired and impatient with waiting and leave the arena, and thereby losing their promised reward. Like Jesus, they must remain in the arena until the prize is awarded or else it will be forfeited. They possessed the fortitude to win their prize, and now they must practice patience in order to receive it.**

**In this interim period there is the danger of drifting away from commitment. We may grow tired of waiting; we may think we have it made. The spiritual exercise of faith, hope, and charity lessen. We begin to express our lives more and more through the lesser dimensions of being--through the physical, emotional, psychic. All these dimensions have their own natural needs and goals. Without willed effort, needed spiritual energy will be diverted to achieve less.**

**In our culture see how much time and energy go into physical fitness and physical sports (active and passive participation). Certainly they are worthy ideals and activities in themselves, but if they should leave little time and energy for anything better, a good has become a perversion. Many women in our culture rightly harass their husbands for their obsession with physical sports, but often for the wrong reason. Often their motivation for harassment is as selfish as that of their husbands.**

**When too much energy and time are devoted to one level of being, it suggests serious neglect of other dimensions of human existence--more often than not the spiritual is the most neglected. Virtue lies in the middle. All extremes are heretical! Sigmund Freud recognized a single source of energy and power within the human person. He maintained that civilization could not have developed if people had not directed this power and energy toward something other than sensual satisfaction. He knew this limited primal energy was needed for whatever man desired to do or was obliged to do. If a person dissipated this energy on basic physical and emotional needs, a person lacked the vitality necessary for higher growth and development. They would remain at the Neanderthal Stage--remaining only a few blocks away from the original cave dwellers.**

**The Christian who wisely wills to build a spiritual life prudently sees to it that the top of their energy goes into their spiritual exercises. They do not leave their spiritual exercises to when they come to the bottom of the barrel of human time and energy. They are not like imprudent virgins who go to see the Lord when their lights are about to go out. Whatever is the best hour of their**

day goes to communication with the Lord, not the last dregs of the day. They seek first the Kingdom of God before adding everything else. If everything else comes first, the best will be lost--the one important thing. *"What shall a man give in exchange for his soul."* *"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of eternal life."* If we are never less than our best--and this is what the author demands—at our death, we will certainly be at our best and so able to enter eternity.

Without proper spiritual exercises, a vital spiritual life cannot survive. Christian Communities need centers of encouragement, and there cannot be encouragement there unless there are brothers and sisters to encourage others. Our author incites his readers: *"We should not absent ourselves from the assembly, as some do, but encourage one another"* (Heb.10:25).

One seriously questions whether weekly attendance at a parish Mass on Sunday would be a sufficient center of encouragement. Sunday Masses are centers of encouragement, but the personal need of encouragement is often left unfulfilled because of the time and energy demanded by a sacramental system, and other demands of present day parochial life. The absence of needed encouragement is largely due to circumstances rather than moral indifference. However, *"Not by bread alone does man live,"* even if it is the Bread of Heaven; man also lives *"by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

We also live by those words of faith, hope, and love that God speaks to us through the Body of Christ--the Christian Community. Paul once wrote: *"Faith, then, comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ"* (Rm.10:17). *"And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?"*(Rm.10:4). Outside of the present parish structure, most Christians need a supplementary Christian support system if they are to do more than survive as Christians in a pagan environment.

The early Christians, like the Jews of old, could not consider a genuine religious life divorced from community life. The covenant relationship was established with a People, and it must be lived within the Community of the Covenant People. A person's entire life was centered on the synagogue where there was worship, leadership, direction, instruction, corporeal and spiritual assistance. A hundred-twenty members were necessary for a religious group

to be incorporated as a synagogue with legitimate religious authority. Of these one hundred-twenty, twelve were elected to rule the congregation.

The early Christian Churches were organized as Christian synagogues. It is not accidental that Acts records that a hundred and twenty were present at the election of Matthias to replace Judas. We read: "*Peter stood up in the center of the brothers: there must have been a hundred and twenty gathered together.*" Acts gives this description of activity in the first Christian synagogue: "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Acts 2:42). Let us recall that the word "church" comes from the Hebrew *edah kahal*, which meant the "solemn assembly" of the People of God for religious purposes.

For the Jew, excommunication from the Community was a punishment one degree less than the death penalty, as life could not be considered as separated from the Community. For a person to separate self from community was tantamount to a rejection of the covenant relationship. Isolated and alienated from community worship and fellowship, a covenant commitment could rarely survive without exceptional graces from God.

When a person foolishly, or selfishly, separates self from the community, they reject the normal means instituted by God to receive the needed supportive graces of God. If one willfully rejects the normal means, it can hardly be expected God will grant to them extraordinary graces. St. Augustine wisely observed: "The Holy Spirit does not pursue the separated member." However, we may add, the Noon Day Devil does pursue the separated member. The Noon Day Devil is a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit. Only the shrewdest of spiritual eyes can distinguish the beginnings of one from the other.

## CHRISTIAN ENCOURAGEMENT

Because our author knew most Christians could not survive as Christians isolated from the Christian Community, he strongly urged them, "*We should not absent ourselves from the assembly [the church], as some do, but encourage one another.*" He detects the selfishness involved in the failure to be part of the Christian assemblies. A person's presence at worship is a passive encouragement to others. If they are open to others, that can quickly become an active encouragement. How often we hear the reason for not going to Church: "I get nothing out of it," or "It does nothing for me." How clearly in

those voices sounds the death knell of the spirit. A life that turns selfishly upon itself, sooner or later drives God out of that life. There is “no room in the Inn.”

Israel may have been able to put God in a box, but the Christian Community never will. The God of Christians is a divine leaven and eternal fire that must spread from one to the other, until all the world becomes permeated with the fire of the divine life.

The author of Hebrews strongly incites Christians to be an encouragement to one another. In our study of Acts we saw how Paul and Barnabas [Son of Encouragement] returned to visit all the Churches established through their ministry. There we read: “*They gave their disciples reassurances and encouraged them to persevere in the faith with this instruction: ‘We must undergo many trials if we are to enter into the reign of God’*” (Acts 14:22).

Our author has truly echoed the spirit of these two apostles. Not only does he encourage the Church but he teaches his readers how to encourage others and what to encourage in others:

*Do not, then surrender your confidence; it will have great reward... God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him by your service, past and present, to his holy people. Our desire is that each of you show the same zeal to the end, fully assured of that for which you hope... Do not grow lazy... We must consider how to arouse each other to love and good deeds... Let us hold unswervingly to our profession which gives us hope, for he who made the [covenant] promise deserves our trust... You need patience to do God’s will [this implies God’s Will causes sufferings in our lives] and receive what he has promised (Heb.10:35; 6:10-12a; 10:24,23,36).*

Our author is no Noon Day Devil that lulls people into a false security and tempts them with the Mercy of God to the sin of presumption. Here we find no sweet false hope being offered. We have here our guide for Christian encouragement. He confirms, with Paul, that true Christian hope has a firm foundation not only in the Mercy of God but in the faithfulness of Christian lives—“*hold unswervingly to our profession which gives us hope.*” “*You need patience to do the will of God and receive what he has promised.*” Therefore, a

true Christian encourages true hope by encouraging members of the Church *“to hold unswervingly to our profession,”* to be patient under trials and sufferings. They encourage each other not only negatively—*“hold firm, be patient”*-but they are also *“to arouse each other to love and good deeds.”* There is the Justice of God as well as the Mercy of God, and the Just God *“will not forget your work and the love you have shown by your service, past and present, to his holy people.”*

Therefore the Christian Community must encourage lazy Christians to works of love in service of the Christian Community. To work without love would be in vain. Our author is certainly not unmindful of the Lord’s judgment to the disciple who buried his one talent: *“You wicked and slothful servant!”* (Mt.25:26), nor is he unmindful of the sentence rendered: *“Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth”* (Mt.25:30). When some men ask, *“Are they few in number who are to be saved?”* (Lk.13:24), a true disciple of Jesus can only respond in the words of Jesus:

*Enter through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few they are that find it! (Mt.7:13-14).*

To the question, will many be saved?, the Noon Day Devils have a different response. Immediately following the above remarks, Jesus said:

*Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl. You will know them by their deeds... None of those who cry out “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Mt. 7: 15-16,21).*

Jesus goes on to say that on the Day of Judgment *“many will plead with me”* but their pleas will not alter the judgment, because nothing can alter what they have freely and willfully come to be by the lives lived and the path that *“many choose to travel.”* Jesus’ own words are: *“I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!”* (Mt.7:23).

Jesus is Truth. The Truth is Light. From Jesus shines the true Light of Truth. Since our author is a Disciple of Truth, he encourages his readers not to

surrender their confidence in their Christian profession or to lose their trust in Jesus Christ. Only a life of fidelity and faithfulness assures salvation. He encourages his readers by quoting from Habakkuk:

*For just a brief moment, and he who is to come will come; he will not delay. My just man will live by faith, and if he draws back I take no pleasure in him. We are not among those who draw back and perish, but among those who have faith and live (Heb.10:37-39).*

### DEFINITION OF FAITH

As we have mentioned in a previous study, the correct translation of “live by faith” is “live by faithfulness.” The prophet and our author both encourage fidelity to the Covenant and perseverance with integrity unto salvation.

For the author, the New Covenant finds within the Old Testament a shadow and forecast of itself. Here he finds evidence in abundance to support his thesis that God demands from all His people a time on earth when only faith in God and hope in His promises sustain the soul. It is a time of testing and purification endured by all chosen souls. He begins his exposition by qualifying the spirit which must permeate the soul during its sojourn in patience. His psychological definition of faith has become one of the most quoted verses of Hebrews. However it is not so much a definition of faith as it is a description of the qualities that comprise the fidelity demanded by faith in God. He writes: “*Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about the things we do not see*” (Heb.11:1).

This definition of faith expresses the subjective environment, the inner milieu of the spirit in which a Christian must abide while on this earth. The first word *hypostasis*, translated “assurance,” expresses the quality of spirit that deals with things presently lacking within the life of the believer but are confidently awaited. The person of faith has an inner guarantee of possessing these things in the future--such as personal purification and perfection, union with God and eternal life. It is only a matter of time and these things will be possessed. The believer is like an heir who has been informed of his inheritance, and it is only a matter of arriving at a certain place in order to enter into that inheritance. It is assured.



The second quality *elegchos*, translated “conviction,” deals with invisible things presently possessed and seen but only through faith. For example--baptism removed all sin from the soul; the Holy Spirit abides in the souls of the just; the soul is in the state of sanctifying grace; a Christian is heir with Jesus Christ and member of His Body; the relationship with God is that of Father to child. All these things a Christian knows to be the present state of Christian existence. Nevertheless the author wants it noted that if a believer draws back from faith all is lost. Faithfulness is absolutely necessary: *“Do not, then, surrender your confidence; it will have great reward. You need patience to do God’s will and receive what he has promised” (Heb.10:35-36).*

### OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

In the examples that follow, the first quality of faith, that of assurance, stands out most prominently. In the example given we see that something was promised, followed by a long absence, and obtained only after the passing of time. The author makes clear the reason for citing the examples to follow: *“Because of faith the men of old were approved by God” (Heb. 11:2).* Now “faith” must be understood here in the light of the author’s own definition. God’s approval of the men of old is being contrasted with those spoken of in Heb. 10:38, who draw back and find God’s displeasure. Apparently the author desires to emphasize to his readers that what is absent in their lives is assuredly theirs if they perseveringly “hold unswervingly” to their “profession” of faith.

Our author indicated that the history of religion and the foundation of religion begin in faith when he writes: *“Through faith we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God, so that what is visible came into being through the invisible” (Heb. 11:3).* Here he indicates the second quality of faith, conviction, to be present in the hearts of his readers. He tells them that we know the universe is not eternal, it came into being, and it was not made out of pre-existing matter but came from the creative Word of God. What is presently perceived has led us to perceive the unseen Creator and the invisible spiritual realities. St. Paul expressed a similar quality of faith when he wrote: *“Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God’s eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things he has made” (Rom.1:20).* This itself echoed the author of Wisdom 13:1-9.

The author of Hebrews desires to teach his readers that the abundance of spiritual richness available to mankind flows only to the souls who live their

lives in fidelity to God's Word. This teaching he will dramatically demonstrate with examples from the lives of Old Testament saints--those saints who foreshadow the saints of the New Covenant. He begins at the very dawn of religious history with the example of Abel and Cain. He relates:

*By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice greater than Cain's. Through this he was attested to be righteous, God bearing witness to his gifts, and through this, though dead, he still speaks (Heb.11:4).*

Since Genesis confirms God's pleasure with the sacrifice of Abel, but not that of Cain, it is implied that Abel lives, because the Scripture says: "*Your brother's blood cries out to me*" (Gn.4:10). The tense used in the Genesis account suggests an on-going action not completed. As blood symbolized life, and the blood of Abel continues to "cry out," the life of Abel continues after death. Such faith leads to eternal life.

Enoch is the next example offered. The Scriptures confirm that "Enoch walked with God." This implies that he did not die, but God took him from the earth. The author writes: "*By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and 'he was seen no more because God took him.'* Before he was taken up, he was pleasing to God--but without faith it is impossible to please him (Heb.11:5-6a).

Our author concluded Enoch's walk had to be one of faith otherwise he could not have pleased God. From this our author declares a fundamental principle of salvation:

*Anyone who comes to God [by this he implies entering heaven and union with God] must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb.11:6b).*

Therefore a saving faith must include these elements: belief in the existence of God, and belief that God is personal and just. The words translated "seek him" express in the Greek a liturgical term for worship of God. As the example of Enoch demonstrates, the quality of faith that believes in God's goodness and worships Him leads to salvation. This example and definition leaves a door open for many to be saved who, through no fault of their own, never come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Noah becomes the third example of faith. Second Peter called him a preacher of holiness. This suggests that Noah endeavored to turn men from their sins but failed to do so. Noah's faith was vindicated by the salvation achieved by himself and his family. Those who failed to believe perished in the flood. We read in Hebrews:

*By faith Noah, warned about things not yet seen, revered God and built an ark that his household might be saved. He thereby condemned the world and inherited the justice which comes through faith (Heb.11:7).*

The example of Noah demonstrates that belief in God's Word may often go contrary to human reason and logic. It may make one appear stupid in the eyes of others. What could have been more unreasonable than to build a huge boat miles from the water? However, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Because Noah had faith, he was saved from being foolish, and the wise men of his day proved to be foolish. *"For God's folly is wiser than men" (1Cor.1:25).* Our author confirms in this example that final righteousness (justification) is the inheritance of a life lived in faith.

### THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM

The author goes on to present Abraham. For Paul, this man represented the greatest example of faith in the Old Testament. Our author emphasizes in this example the correlation between faith and obedience, and obedience and love. Out of faith Abraham leaves his former life behind and trusts his future to divine guidance. We read:

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage; he went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise (Heb.11:8-9).*

Abraham, his son, and grandson dwelt as strangers in the land of his descendants. The author suggests that because they were men of faith they could not receive an earthly inheritance as their inheritance. They were destined to the true reward of faith. They were *"looking forward to the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God" (Heb.11:10).*

Because of her faith, Sarah subjectively made it possible for God, for whom nothing is objectively impossible, to cause her to bear a child when she and Abraham were beyond the age to do so. This example illustrates that God can produce the impossible within those who possess faith in Him. It demonstrates that where there is faith, God can bring to life that which is dead. That which naturally speaking has become sterile and barren may, through faith, bear an abundant harvest. As our author relates:

*By faith Sarah received power to conceive though she was past the age, for she thought that the One who had made the promise was worthy of trust. As a result of this faith, there came forth from one man, who was himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore (Heb.11:11-12).*

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three patriarchs, all lived and died in faith. “All of these died in faith,” says our author. The life of Abraham culminated with his greatest act of fidelity to God’s command. At the command of God he goes to Moriah with his son as a sacrifice. In the words of Paul, he was brought to “hope against hope.” We read in Hebrews:

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to sacrifice his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be called.” He reasoned that God was able to raise from the dead, and so he received Isaac back as a symbol (Heb.11:17-19).*

Abraham’s faith had to extend beyond the veil. He was called to believe that God could raise the dead to life. He believed this and acted accordingly. This episode likewise demonstrated that faith and obedience imply love of God. The Lord confirmed this in Genesis:

*I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son. ... In your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessings--all this because you obeyed my command (Gn.22:12c,18).*

God may ask His friends to be generous with Him, but it is only in order that He may be unimaginably generous to them. When the author wrote, “He reasoned that God was able to raise from the dead and so he received Isaac back

*as a symbol,*” he no doubt sees Isaac as a symbol of the Resurrected Jesus Christ.

The life of Isaac ended in faith as he died calling down God’s blessings upon his sons Jacob and Esau, *“By faith Isaac invoked for Jacob and Esau blessings that were still to be” (Heb.11:20)*. Jacob expressed his faith at death as he *“blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped God, leaning on the head of his staff” (Heb.11:21)*. Both Isaac and Jacob demonstrated their faith in God’s promise to Abraham as they transmitted this promise through their last blessings. Our author sums the faith of the three patriarchs in these words:

*By acknowledging themselves to be strangers and foreigners on the earth, they showed that they were seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking back to the place from which they had come, they would have had the opportunity of returning there. But they were searching for a better, a heavenly home. Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Heb.11:13-16).*

The author suggests that the lives of his readers are a pilgrimage on this earth; they have no lasting home here—God has prepared something far greater for them. The final rewards of a life of fidelity are not earthly blessings but heavenly blessings. The rewards are a heavenly home and union with God: *“God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”*

Joseph carried on the faith of Abraham and expressed his faith in the fulfillment of God’s promise by foretelling *“the Exodus of the Israelites”* from Egypt and *“he gave instructions about his burial” (11:22)*. *“Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten. He was embalmed and laid to rest in a coffin in Egypt” (Gn.50:26)*. There he rested for several hundred years. However, because of his faith, his body was carried from Egypt into the Promised Land. This would suggest that the final end of those who live and die in faith will be the resurrection of their bodies from the dead and their entrance into glory. It matters not how long the bodies rest in the earth--one day they will enter into the Promised Land.

## THE EXAMPLE OF MOSES

The greatest personage in the Old Testament after Abraham would be Moses. In many ways Moses prefigured the Messiah to come. The author demonstrates that Moses' life, from beginning to end, expressed faith in God's Promise to Israel. This faith expressed itself in a life of fidelity and faithfulness to God's Will. The life of Moses teaches that true faith actively expresses itself in the life of the believer throughout their entire life. Faith guides their destiny! The life of faith is expressed in these words, "*I have come to do your will*" (Heb.11:9). From the author's accounts of Moses, we know he relied not only on the Scriptures, but upon the oral traditions passed down.

The writer begins by relating that the parents of Moses recognized the favor of God upon their child: he symbolized the Hope of Israel. They expressed their faith in this hope by defying the edict of Pharaoh. We read, "*By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after his birth, thereby disregarding the king's edict, because they saw that he was a beautiful child*" (Heb.11:23).

The parents of Moses were indeed symbols of Mary and Joseph who, because of their faith in God's Promise, defied King Herod and hid Jesus in Egypt for three years. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was reared in luxury and power. What the kingdom of this world had to offer lay at his feet.

Because of faith in the Divine Promise and in response to divine inspiration, Moses abandoned the wealth and power of Egypt and associated himself with a despised and enslaved people. He chose to share their sad lot rather than share in the glory of this world. In this he becomes a symbol of the Word made Flesh. Our author writes, "*By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter*" (Heb.11:24). The author stresses not only the faith but the sanctity of Moses when he relates "*he wished to be ill-treated along with God's people rather than enjoy the fleeting rewards of sin*" (11:25). Faithless people eagerly seek to enjoy the fleeting rewards of sin. Unlike the Patriarchs of faith, they do not see themselves as strangers on earth searching "for a better, a heavenly home." They are at home!

Moses identified himself with the Jewish People. They symbolized the Messianic People yet to come--the people to be anointed with the Holy Spirit. By so doing, Moses associated himself with Christ and with the sufferings of Christ. All men who suffer to accomplish the Will of God in this world are identifiable with Christ in His sufferings. Moses sought this identification and

paid a dear price for it, for the spiritual blessings it would bring to him -- becoming a friend of God considered worthy to behold God in time and forever. We read, *“Moses considered the reproach borne by God’s Anointed greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward”* (Heb.11:26).

Through faith Moses had the courage to risk the wrath of the Pharaoh, to trust in times of danger the protective love of God, to lead the People from Egypt through the Red Sea. Our author relates:

*By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s wrath, for he persevered as if he were looking on the invisible God. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the lamb’s blood, that the destroying angel might not touch the first-born of Israel. By faith the Israelites crossed the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted the same thing they were drowned* (Heb.11:27-29).

By faith Moses traveled through the Sea and made a road through the desert to the Promised Land. What people of faith are able to do, faithless people die in the attempt.

Scripture reveals that Moses, because of one sin of infidelity, did not enter the Promised Land. Moses saw the Promised Land from a distant mountain top. As our author wrote, *“They did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar”* (Heb.11:13). For these men of faith the true promise concerned something better--a reward in a higher realm—“a better, a heavenly home.” For our author it is this quality of faith that enables men and women to reject “the fleeting rewards of sin” and choose a desert path in this life, even if it involves the wrath of the king and ill-treatment from their fellow men.

After Moses, this same quality of faith lived on in Israel:

*Because of Israel’s faith, the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot escaped from being destroyed with the unbelievers, for she had peacefully received the spies* (11:30-31).

Rahab became a symbol of a lost person who finds salvation and peace through true faith in the Messiah.

The author continues to turn the pages of the Old Testament, pointing out one after another, great men and women of faith who lived out their lives in heroic faithfulness. He asks:

*What more shall I recount? I have no time to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, or David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms... (Heb.11:32-33).*

Our author indicates they conquered something greater than kingdoms by faith--they conquered themselves. He implies this when he says, “[they] *did what was just.*” The actions of their lives expressed their fidelity to the faith professed and so he adds, they “*obtained the promises.*” “Promises” here apparently refers not to “the promise,” but the here and now rewards and fruits of faithful action:

*They broke the jaws of lions [David, Daniel], put out raging fires [three youths in Dn.3:49], escaped the devouring sword; though weak they were made powerful [Samuel], became strong in battle, and turned back foreign invaders. Women received back their dead through resurrection [1Kgs.17:17-24;2Kgs.4:18-37]” (Heb.11:33c-35a).*

One of the greatest triumphs of faith is the fortitude displayed by men and women in the face of persecution and death. Their lives of fidelity proved that faith was not mere words upon their lips, but a burning fire within their hearts. They patiently endured all possible hardship rather than compromise their faith. They not only believed, but they were faithful to what they believed. Our author sings a song of praise to the heroism of the saints of old:

*Others were tortured and would not receive deliverance, in order to obtain a better resurrection [The Martyrs of the Maccabean era]. Still others endured mockery, scourging, even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned [Zechariah, 2Chr.24:20-22], sawed in two, put to death at sword’s point; they went about garbed in the skins of sheep or goats, needy, afflicted, tormented. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and on*



*mountains, they dwelt in caves and in holes of the earth (Heb.11:35b-38).*

The author ends this whole account of heroism in faith on a jarring and shocking note:

*Yet despite the fact that all of these were approved because of their faith, they did not obtain what had been promised. God had made a better plan, a plan which included us. Without us, they were not to be made perfect (Heb.11:39-40).*

They had to await the inauguration of the New Covenant. Despite all these trials and sufferings they did not obtain the promise. Over the centuries they waited patiently until the Coming of Christ. Although faith had its reward, it must look to Christ for the fulfillment of its reward--forgiveness of sins, atonement, and total redemption.

If the saints of the Old Testament had to place hope and faith in Christ, then certainly the readers of Hebrews must see that to abandon faith in Jesus Christ is to abandon all hope. The saints of the Old Testament lived their lives out in fidelity to God with only the promise of God stimulating their faith and hope. Christians, on the other hand, have already begun their entrance into the Promised Land--they have *"tasted the heavenly gift and become sharers in the Holy Spirit, they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come."* If they should now falter in their fidelity to Christ, if they should "draw back"--God will certainly find no pleasure in them. In the words of our author:

*In view of this, we must attend all the more to what we have heard, lest we drift away...how shall we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as ours? (Heb.2:1,3).*

*We are not among those who draw back and perish, but among those who have faith and live (Heb.10:39).*

## CHAPTER 9

### THE WAY HOME

#### INTRODUCTION

In the Hellenistic world that saw the birth of the Christian Church, athletics played a large part. Influenced by their environment, certain New Testament writers compared certain aspects of the Christian life to an athletic contest. St. Paul, no doubt influenced by the Isthmian Games of Corinth, wrote the Corinthians:

*You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that withers, but we, a crown that is imperishable (1Cor.9:24-25).*

Combining the imagery of racing and boxing, Paul describes himself:

*I do not run like a man who loses sight of the finish line. I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. What I do is discipline my own body and master it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be rejected (1Cor.9:26-27).*

*I put no value on my life if only I can finish my race and complete the service to which I have been assigned by the Lord Jesus, bearing witness to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24).*

As Paul's earthly life is drawing to its close, he writes Timothy:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me; on that Day the Lord, just judge that he is, will award it to me (2Tm.4:7-8b).*

Paul certainly acknowledged being saved through the Mercy of God, but he likewise acknowledged gaining a reward by his life of fidelity that the Just Judge would render to him.

For the author of Hebrews, being a Christian implied being a spiritual athlete engaged in a contest with eternal consequences. He pictured the present world as a sports arena in which Christians stand as contestants. In the ancient world, many contestants in the arena fought to the death. The author saw his readers standing in an amphitheater surrounded by rows of spectators. The first row would be the visible crowd: hostile to the Christian life, eager to see its defeat, merciless in its attitude towards the contestants. However, this visible crowd is not the only witness to the spectacle. Above the earthly crowd sat a "cloud of witnesses," there to encourage and strengthen perseverance in the contestants who have won their first victory.

This "cloud of witnesses" is made up of the saints of the Old Testament. There is Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, Zephaniah, Isaiah, the martyrs of the Maccabean times, John the Baptist. There, present in the cloud, are all those heroic men and women who lived and died in faith--who chose physical death over apostasy. The lives of these people presently bear witness to God's power and fidelity. These conquered with only faith and hope in a distant promise. Those presently within the arena have already "*tasted*" and "*become sharers in the Holy Spirit*" (Heb.6:4). The Greek word for witness was *martyr*. Already this word assumes the meaning it would have in the Christian Community. For our author, the cloud of witnesses is more than spectators. They are concrete examples of what the contest is all about. Their former lives teach men and women, presently in the world, how to play the game to win; they themselves are all winners. We may note that the author omits from the heavenly roll-call such losers as Saul and Solomon. St. John Chrysostom maintained that as the clouds in the sky protect the runners from the burning rays of the sun, the saints in heaven act as protective shields around the faithful on earth. Apparently this New Testament writer believed in the Communion of the Saints.

### SPIRITUAL ATHLETES

Our author encourages his readers: *Therefore, since we for our part are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every encumbrance of sin which clings to us and persevere in running the race which lies ahead (Heb.12:1).*

The author refers to the Christian Contest, as did Paul, as a race. St. John Chrysostom maintains this sport was chosen because it would have been less repugnant to the Christian Community. Both men and women--ladies and gentlemen--could at least run a race. When racers seriously run for a prize, they strip down to the minimum of clothing so as not to be encumbered by unnecessary obstacles. Today we see swimmers in a race who will actually shave their heads completely in order to increase their speed.

The author of Hebrews is a good spiritual coach. The first advice this coach gives Christian athletes is to rid themselves of personal sins. Realistically, he admits sin exists in the Community. However the very fact that they are still participants in the race implies the sin is not apostasy. Apostasy automatically disqualifies a contestant from the race. Here sin is seen as an entanglement that hinders proper movement--as something that encircles the contestant and blocks their path. St. Paul teaches sin to be a power enslaving people. Like an octopus with eight arms, it encircles its victims making movement impossible, ultimately producing death through atrophy.

As previously mentioned, not only is our time limited but also our energy. The race must be run against the clock, and much energy will be needed to complete the course successfully. Habitual sins are truly parasites that absorb and drain the soul's energy. They can leave the spirit too weak to run, much less win. All sin burns up spiritual energy needed by the soul for its growth and development. All sin implies misused and misdirected power.

The toughest job of a good coach will often be un-training the athlete who picked-up bad habits along the way. To break a bad habit takes more time and energy than it takes to form a good one. Converted sinners need time and patience to achieve virtue, for they enter the waters of conversion with bad habits, and usually emerge with them. The Lord is no fairy godmother waving a magic wand, removing bad habits formed by willful deeds. The removal of sin is not the same thing as the removal of bad habits caused by sin. Habits--good or evil--result from repeatedly willing them. It is a general rule that the recovery takes as much time and energy as the breakdown. Real personal sanctity follows conversion, and, generally speaking, it follows a considerable time after conversion.

Be wary of instant saints. Sanctity gained in an instant can be lost instantly. The Noon-Day Devil tempts the spirit to assume instant sanctity. Where true humility is lacking among the newly converted, he has considerable success. He, too, creates “saints” in the clouds. As mentioned earlier, he is called the Noon-Day Devil because he counterfeits the Holy Spirit. He appears as bright light. He works trickery upon his victims as cunningly as the serpent did upon Eve. He withdraws temptations of the flesh in order to create the illusion of personal holiness. At the same time he begins to infuse light on the Gospels and Sacred Scriptures. His victims gain spiritual knowledge and insights with a minimum of effort. He feeds their pride by granting extraordinary gifts to them.

Now the tell-tale slime of the serpent forms a cloud above his victims and one beneath their feet. Their heads are wrapped in a cloud of spiritual pride. They immediately must preach and teach all others. They are the Illuminated. They reject the guidance of proper authority and spiritual direction. They disdain the laws of the Church. As one author observed, “Heresies pour forth from them as rain from black clouds.” They become tribunals before which the Christian Community will be judged. They are filled with a zeal that all should be as holy as they--yet secretly they know none ever will be. The second cloud quickly forms beneath them--the cloud of disdain. They have disdain and contempt for sinners and morally weak people. They have zeal without charity--the proper ingredients for fanaticism. Often such people personally fall into degrading sins of impurity. The Good Lord mercifully pulls the rug out from under them in order to save them through humility. However, the enemy is never without an ace in the hole; he now encourages them to despair.

The word translated “encumbrance” comes from the Greek word *ogkon*, which signifies “bulk of body.” As a good coach, the author wants the spiritual contestants to trim down--to rid themselves of unnecessary and useless things that only impede their progress. Sinful things first of all, and secondarily those unnecessary social and business entanglements that often dissipate human energy and, at the same time, fragment the personality. It takes time, energy, coaching, concentration, attention, and willed effort to abide in the Will of God until the end, and become one of Faith’s winners! Paul advised Timothy:

*Try hard to make yourself worthy of God’s approval, a workman who has no cause to be ashamed... So turn from youthful passions*

*and pursue integrity, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord in purity of heart (2Tm.2:15a,22).*

### THE SUPREME WITNESS

The author certainly does not want Christians to be unmindful of the “cloud of witnesses” or of their contribution to the Community, but they are not to become the focus of Christian attention. Earlier he wrote, “*Fix your eyes on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we acknowledge in faith, who was faithful in him who appointed him*” (Heb.3:1b-2a). He now calls his readers’ attention to look above the cloud of witnesses and focus their eyes upon Jesus. Behold the reward of his fidelity! He writes:

*Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame. He has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God (Heb.12:2).*

By the use of the name Jesus, he calls upon his readers to contemplate the humanity of Jesus. He is recalling those words previously written:

*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb.5:8-9).*

Jesus could not be faith’s inspiration and the cause of its perfection if He had not lived a life of perfect faith and, through faith, triumphed over human sufferings. “*Since he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tempted*” (Heb.2:18). The author maintains that Jesus offered himself and endured the cross heedless of its shame. Cicero of old said that to die upon the cross was the cruelest death on earth. Cruel because of the great torment it inflicted upon the human person. Roman law reserved this death only for slaves and foreign criminals. Jesus bore the shame of dying the death of slaves and criminals. He bore this shameful death as he died to atone for sin that makes slaves and criminals of all. He had faith that by so doing, He would redeem mankind from the enslavement of sin and atone for its sinful crimes. He bore this pain and shame in order to know the joy of being the Redeemer of the world. In his earthly life, He bore these sufferings for the joy they would bring. Our author urges his readers not to forget the sufferings or the joy of Jesus--Jesus who remained faithful until death on the

**Cross. He says: “Remember how he endured the opposition of sinners, hence do not grow despondent or abandon the struggle” (Heb.12:3). Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory, God “...should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb.2:10).**

**The author warned earlier: “We have become partners of Christ only if we maintain to the end that confidence with which we began” (Heb.3:14). In the naval history of the United States we are told that when the ship of John Paul Jones was aflame and its mast broken, the enemy requested his surrender. Jones replied to the request for surrender with, “We have not yet begun to fight!” The writer of Hebrews encourages that same spirit in his readers: “In your fight against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” (Heb.12:4).**

**Here, sin would refer to apostasy. The writer implies a day of blood may yet come. It came in the life of Jesus, in the life of Peter and Paul, and it may well come in the life of his readers. If they are to endure such a contest and will the crown, they must be prepared. Whatever they endure, the author sees as permitted and willed by God for the good of their future. The Lord knows the day is coming and to what tests their Christian commitment will be subjected. The Lord once told His disciples, “Pray that you may come through all that lies ahead of you and stand erect to meet the Son of Man when he comes.”**

**The Lord permits sufferings in order to prepare and perfect the disciples of Jesus. Was not the Pioneer of our salvation perfected in this manner. Is there another way? To teach this lesson, the author uses the homely example of a father’s chastisement of his child for the child’s good. The author implies that the Heavenly Father does not spare the rod and spoil the child. The chastisement of Christians proves they are children of the Heavenly Father who loves them. Recalling the words of Proverbs 3:11-12, the author writes:**

*Moreover, you have forgotten the encouraging words addressed to you as sons: “My sons, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord nor lose heart when he reproveth you; For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he receives.” Endure your trials as the discipline of God, who deals with you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you do not know the discipline of sons, you are not sons but bastards. If we respected our earthly fathers who corrected us, should we not all the more submit to the Father of spirits, and live? They disciplined us as seemed*

*right to them, to prepare us for the short span of mortal life; but God does so for our true profit, that we may share his holiness (Heb.12:5-10).*

The word translated discipline (*paideias*) can signify instruction, or training, or child development. However, when a person is being trained to withstand sin unto death, discipline must imply more than verbal instructions; it must consist of a program geared to prepare the person to withstand what must come. The author stresses that the earthly father does the limited best he can for a limited good and goal. However, the Heavenly Father does not suffer these limitations and works for the eternal good of His children. God uses sufferings endured by Christians in this life to perfect, purify, and prepare them for union with God. As the author expressed it: *“that we may share his holiness.”* [Be aware of those Christians “illuminated” by the Noon-Day Devil who teach otherwise!] God will permit physical, emotional, and spiritual sufferings in the lives of His children if it would be for their spiritual welfare. We read in Isaiah:

*The Lord will give you the bread you need and the water for which you thirst. No longer will your Teacher hide himself, but with your own eyes you shall see your Teacher... On the day the Lord binds up the wounds of his people, he will heal the bruises left by his blows (Is.30:20,26c).*

When such sufferings do exist in the life of Christians, we may say in faith they exist for the eternal good of the sufferer. Ours is not to reason why! We know the why, and we know generally the what for. From our limited point of view we may be unable to see the good being accomplished, only by faith can we know it to be so.

We find in the Second Book of Maccabees one of the best scriptural interpretations of sufferings in the lives of God’s People. Its author is about to recount the sufferings of the saints, and as a prelude he writes:

*Now I beg those who read this book not to be disheartened by these misfortunes, but to consider that these chastisements were meant not for the ruin but for the correction of our nation. It is, in fact, a sign of great kindness to punish sinners promptly instead of letting them go for long. Thus, in dealing with other nations, the Lord patiently waits until they reach the full measure of their sins before he*



*punishes them; but with us he has decided to deal differently, in order that he may not have to punish us more severely later, when our sins have reached their fullness. He never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with misfortunes, he does not abandon his own people. Let these words suffice for recalling this truth (2Mc.6:12-17).*

The writer honestly observes that no one naturally or spiritually likes being disciplined. In times of divine discipline the person indeed experiences pain and sorrow. It invoked these words from St. Teresa of Avila: "If you treat all of your friends like you do me, no wonder you have so few!" The effect of God's discipline upon the person depends upon the attitude and reaction to sufferings. What is borne in patient endurance begets fruitful blessings.

In time, saints came to appreciate sufferings within their lives and to recognize the great spiritual good being accomplished through this means. Many Christian adults, like little children, cannot distinguish between love and like. They cannot comprehend how a father, earthly or heavenly, could chastise them because he did not like everything about them and yet still love them.

Chastisement means not only is there room for improvement but there is hope for it also. The wise Christian knows that God does not treat them like bastards even though they may feel as if he does. Christians are often jealous of the good fortune enjoyed by certain spiritual bastards in this world. They seem, in life, to have it all. They should reflect upon, and distinguish between, material and spiritual blessings. Some people in this world have had it all. Some are destined to hear at the end of their lives: "You have had your reward!" The saints understood that any suffering of the loss of possessions in this world is worthy, if in the end God be possessed forever.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

The author is aware of the effect the members of the Community have upon one another. He exhorts the Community to rekindle its spirit and strive along the Way with vigor. He writes:

*So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight the paths you walk on, that your halting limbs may not be dislocated but healed (Heb.12:12-13).*

The stronger members of the Community ought to be a positive encouragement for those weaker in faith and virtue. They should not become stumbling blocks one for another, but strive to remove unnecessary obstacles from the paths of their brothers and sisters. The word scandal means stumbling block. When Christians place actions that encourage another to do wrong, they are causing “the halting limbs” of others to “be dislocated.”

The Christian duty of aiding each other naturally flows into considering the effect of communal experience and Christian example. Speaking to the Community the author says, “*Strive for peace with all men, and for that holiness without which no one can see the Lord*” (Heb.12:14). Within this one sentence he teaches that Christians must live in the world--be present to the lives of men--but they are not to be of the world. They must be people of good will to all men. When it comes to actually living out one’s life in peace with all men, St. Paul prudently wrote: “*Never repay injury with injury... Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good... If possible, live peaceably with everyone*” (Rom.12:17ff).

### ROOT OF BITTERNESS

If a Christian must choose between holiness and peace, the choice must be holiness; it is an essential condition for union with God. For the pleasure of peaceful relationship, one must not sacrifice personal holiness. The unique Biblical word for holiness is *naiasmos*. Paul expressed its concept well when he wrote, “*Keep yourselves unspotted from this world.*” Holiness is the fundamental condition that prepares the spirit for union with God. It is the intrinsic wedding garment of the spirit. Holiness is a necessary condition for the Presence of God and union with God. The author turns his attention to consider elements which destroy both peace and holiness. He exhorts, “*See to it that no man falls away from the grace of God; that no bitter root springs up through which many may become defiled*” (Heb.12:15).

Earlier the author wrote, “*We must attend all the more to what we have heard, lest we drift away*” (Heb.2:1). This “drift away” carries the same concept as “fall away.” It is not a reference to a single act but a continuous, almost imperceptible drifting and falling away from listening to and heeding the Holy Spirit. He brings our attention to the nigh imperceptible growth of evil within the human spirit. First the hearing goes and the spirit grows sluggish toward the Voice. Next, the will seeks its pleasure in sources other than God’s Will. The strongest stimulus stimulates. Spiritual progress stops. Life never remains

static. It is either in a state of ascension or descension. The spirit is neither a helicopter nor a humming bird that can hold itself in a state of static suspension. The sparks of infidelity feed upon the straws of disobedience, and defection continues until it becomes more consciously deliberate, and the evil root produces its bitterest fruit--open defiance and contempt of Christian duties and its exalted status.

The Greek text reads "root of bitterness" instead of "bitter root." This expression finds its proper interpretation in Deuteronomy 29:17 where we read:

*Let there be, then, no man or woman, no clan or tribe among you, who would now turn away their hearts from the Lord, our God, to go and serve these pagan gods! Let there be no root that would bear such poison and wormwood among you! ...the Lord will never consent to pardon him. Instead, the Lord's wrath and jealousy will flare up against that man (Dt.29:17-19b).*

The root spoken of here in Hebrews is infidelity of the heart. It is sin of the will--so deeply personal. The bitterness of the root is the full flowering of infidelity--apostasy from Jesus Christ. When such a spirit appears within the Christian Community it becomes a spreading evil in which "many may become defiled." The author continues to urge fidelity to grace and stresses the evil end of drifting and falling away when he writes:

*See to it that no man falls away from the grace of God...that there be among you no fornicator or godless person like Esau, who sold his birthright for a meal. You know that afterward he wanted to inherit his father's blessing, but he was rejected because he had no opportunity to alter his choice, even though he sought the blessing with tears (Heb.12:16-17).*

## THE ESAU PEOPLE

Infidelity to grace leads to unholiness, symbolized by the sin of fornication, and to ungodliness. Esau, the son of Isaac, has become the biblical symbol of the profane person. This would be the person who would live with no reference or acknowledgment of God's claim over human life. The Esau man or woman lives for the moment's gratification. The biological and emotional dimensions of life entirely engulf them. Their lives are dedicated "to enjoy the

fleeting rewards of sin.” The spiritual has no positive influence upon their lives. They may give lip service to Christian morality, but their appreciation of it will never be permitted to impede their enjoyment of life’s fleeting pleasures. The sinfulness of pleasure is never considered.

For our writer, the sin of fornication best symbolizes this moral condition. Sacred Scripture takes a firm stand against this sin. It warns that such sin evokes God’s displeasure and wrath. It is not without reason that fornication in the Scriptures symbolizes apostasy. The sin of fornication destroys holiness. Few human instincts or drives are stronger than the sexual instinct. If its power dominates the personality, it enslaves the human spirit. It is a master that may leave time and energy for little else. The newspapers are constantly filled with stories of mass murders committed for the purpose of sexual gratification. These are extreme but not rare examples. It is an area within the human dimension in which the evil spirit finds frequent entrance, and through which he may produce total human corruption. The New Testament Scriptures teach that Christians have received the grace of self-control and the power to make the human body an instrument of God’s glory. Paul wrote the Romans:

*Do not, therefore, let sin rule your mortal body and make you obey its lusts; no more shall you offer the members of your body to sin as weapons for evil. Rather, offer yourselves to God as men who have come back from the dead to life, and your bodies to God as weapons for justice... Just as formerly you enslaved your bodies to impurity and licentiousness for their degradation, make them now the servants of justice for their sanctification... What benefit did you then enjoy? Things you are now ashamed of, all of them tending toward death (Rom. 6:12-13,19b,21).*

*Those who live according to the flesh are intent on the things of the flesh, those who live according to the spirit, on those of the spirit... those who are in the flesh cannot please God... If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the spirit you put to death the evil deeds of the body, you will live (Rom.8:5,8,13).*

In the actual case of Esau we see a man who, through the grace of God, received a privileged position that one day would bring many benefits and blessings to him. However, he was indifferent to the gift of grace; it meant nothing to him. “The bird in hand” absorbed his interests. Personal gratifi-

cation on the physical level, even in a small matter, became more important than any spiritual privilege. For the one, he gladly gave up the other. But typical of the character, he ignored his past life and claimed the benefits that should have come from his privileged position of first-born. However, he and all like him, run into the justice of God. God's mercy comes to those who repent, not to those who merely sorrow for their sins without ever repenting that they preferred to "enjoy the fleeting rewards of sin" to being a child of God. What it really comes down to is that Esau, and all those he represents, would again sell his birthright for a hot meal. If one does not choose God in time, there is no other time in which to make the choice: *"He had no opportunity to alter his choice, even though he sought the blessing with tears."* Esau had to live with his choice!

### THE VOICE TO HEED

As the Epistle draws to a close, the author again contrasts the Old and New Covenants. By his description of the inauguration of the first covenant, he emphasizes God's unapproachableness, and the unholiness of people that made approaching God impossible. The reaction of Israel to the Voice of God suggests their reluctance to achieve holiness and their preference for Moses to mediate between them and Yahweh. Our writer records:

*You have not drawn near to an untouchable mountain and a blazing fire, nor gloomy darkness and storm and trumpet blast, nor a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that they be not addressed to them, for they could not bear to hear the command: "if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." Indeed, so fearful was the spectacle that Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling" (Heb.12:18-21).*

Since Israel lacked the love that cast out fear, it was a covenant of fear. Even Moses experienced great fear in his role as mediator. However, our author maintains that Christians have not drawn near to a holy fearful mountain, but:

*No, you have drawn near to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to myriads of angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the first-born enrolled in heaven, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus,*

*the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks more eloquently than that of Abel (Heb.12:22-24).*

Only perfect love casts out fear of worship of God. With a love perfected in suffering, Jesus approached the Majesty of God without fear and offered His Blood, which forever “speaks” to the Mercy of God for sinners. Paul teaches that Christians presently possess, as a divine gift, the love of God: *“The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given us” (Rom.5:5)*. Through the Holy Spirit Christians are urged to call God *“Abba.”*

For the author, Mount Zion symbolized the dwelling place of the Divine Majesty which the earthly Mount Zion with its temple only prefigured. Mount Zion is the “city of the living God” which the patriarchs of old sought—*“the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God” (Heb.11:20)*. *“They were searching for a better, a heavenly home.”* This heavenly home they found. The expression “city of the living God” implies that God does not dwell in this heavenly home in majestic isolation and fearful splendor, but He dwells surrounded by persons who love Him and who are loved by Him.

The author has given us a brief peek into the Holy of Holies. There we see not only myriads of angels, the first born of God’s creation, but also the spirits of the just men and women. There, in communion with God and angels are the men and women of the Old Testament who, through their lives of faithfulness, passed the judgment of God, and have been declared worthy to enter the heavenly city because of their faithfulness and because of the merits of Jesus’ Passion and Death. There, seated in the heavenly sanctuary is Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant sealed in His blood. There Jesus lives, not crying for vengeance but to save: *“He is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them” (Heb.7:25)*.

Our author now turns his readers’ attention to their side of the veil, instructing them how to live here in order to arrive there. They are not only to keep their eyes upon Jesus, but he warns them:

*Do not refuse to hear him who speaks. For if the Israelites did not escape punishment when they refused to listen as God spoke to them on earth, how much greater punishment will be ours if we turn away from him who speaks from heaven! (Heb.12:25).*

Christians must have ears open to obedience. *“Today, if you hear his voice harden not your hearts!” “Do not refuse to hear him who speaks.”* He who speaks from Heaven is Jesus. Recall the opening words of this Epistle:

*In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets; in this, the final age, he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he has made heir of all things and through whom he first created the universe (Heb.1:1-2).*

He cautioned his readers in chapter two: *“In view of this, we must attend all the more to what we have heard, lest we drift away...how shall we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as ours?” (Heb.2:1-3).* To hear and obey Jesus is the only way into the Holy of Holies. The author confirms the apocalyptic ending of the universe:

*His voice then shook the earth, but now he has promised, “I will once more shake not only earth but heaven!” And that “once more” shows that shaken, created things will pass away, so that only what is unshaken may remain (Heb.12:26-27).*

Not too subtly he intimates that all those shaken in their faith in Jesus Christ will be part of the final conflagration. Only those who “hold fast to God’s grace” are those inheriting “the unshakable kingdom” that will not pass away. They alone stand upon a rock foundation. As the author says:

*Wherefore, we who are receiving the unshakable kingdom should hold fast to God’s grace, through which we may offer worship acceptable to him in reverence and awe (Heb.12:28).*

For the author of Hebrews, the same God stands behind both the Old and New Covenants. What makes the difference between the two Covenants is Jesus Christ. Jesus offers, in this world, the only avenue to personal holiness and escape from eternal damnation. To reject Jesus is to reject holiness—*“that holiness without which no one can see the Lord” (Heb.12:14).* The author concludes his formal presentation with the proclamation, *“For God is a consuming fire.”* He implies that this fire will consume all that is unholy in the universe. A good interpretation of the author’s meaning of “Our God is a consuming fire” was demonstrated in a movie called “The Raiders of the Lost Ark,” at the moment the Ark of the Covenant was opened by profane people.

## THE ROAD HOME

Certain scholars maintain that the original version of this Epistle concluded upon this note, and that the following verses were added later by another person. This is maintained more because of style than content. However, if it was the intention of a trained teacher within the Christian Community to present a formal thesis defending the universal significance of the Christian religion, he would certainly present his material in a formal manner--a style and manner he may not use on less formal moments. But, many scholars maintain the last chapter is the work of the author of Hebrews. What follows may be called "talk" after the formal presentation. Nothing expressed is found to be out of keeping with the mind of the author.

For our author, the Christian Community draws near to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. Christians stand in the vestibule of Heaven. If they are to be judged worthy of entrance, their lives on earth must reflect their citizenship in the "city of the living God." The writer stresses: "*For here we have no lasting city; we are seeking one which is to come*" (Heb.13:14).

The closing chapter of Hebrews is a hasty summary of the spiritual exercises that will ensure a life of peace and holiness. The Christian Community, as a reflection of the heavenly Community, must live in the spirit of *philadelphia*--brotherly and sisterly love. They must open their homes to fellow pilgrims. They must seek to bring comfort and consolation to their imprisoned brothers and sisters. He writes:

*Love your fellow Christians always. Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by that means some have entertained angels without knowing it. Be as mindful of prisoners as if you were sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you may yet suffer as they do (Heb.13:1-3).*

Christians must avoid those spirits which destroy personal holiness--selfish promiscuity and greed. Such will exclude them from Heaven. The author warns:

*Let marriage be honored in every way and the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Do not love money but be content with what you have, for God has said, "I will*



*never desert you, nor will I forsake you.” Thus we may say with confidence: “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; What can man do to me?” (Heb.13: 4-6).*

Christians who live lives of sexual promiscuity and marital infidelity, who are absorbed in “love of money” truly live faithless lives. Christians are to model their lives on the apostles and saints who have preceded them. *“Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you; consider how their lives ended, and imitate their faith” (Heb.13:7).* They are to recall the lives of those leaders, and how they lived and ended their lives in peace and holiness because of their devotion and fidelity to Jesus Christ.

If those “leaders” had been men such as Peter and Paul, their loss to the Community would have been profoundly experienced. Our author suggests these men were what they were in the Community because of Jesus Christ. The same Christ that inspired and strengthened the apostles and saints remains present in the church today. The author writes: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb.13:8).* The writer professes that the “rock foundation” of Christian faith is the Lordship of Jesus Christ that abides forever.

As long as we must live in this world we will be tempted in faith. The author prudently warns his readers against false teachers and doctrines. He goes further by insisting that they do not participate in Jewish worship. He writes:

*Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching. It is good to have our hearts strengthened by the grace of God and not by foods which are useless to those who take them as a standard for living. We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. The bodies of the animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sin offering are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus died outside the gate, to sanctify the people by his own blood (Heb.13:9-12).*

The author suggests that Jesus Himself had suffered excommunication from the earthly Jerusalem, and died outside the gate. There on the Cross He died as a sin offering. Now there is no further relationship between Judaism and Jesus. *“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.”* Leviticus forbade the Israelites to partake of the “sin offering.” Our author indicates that as long as one is a Jew he cannot participate in

communion with Jesus. Therefore, he urges his readers to join Jesus outside the earthly Jerusalem, to abandon the sacrifice of the Old Covenant, and gather around the altar and sacrifice of the New Covenant--Jesus Christ Crucified. *“Let us go to him outside the camp, bearing the insult which he bore” (Heb.13:13).* There before the altar of Christians--the Cross of Christ--let the Christian sacrifice and offerings that are pleasing to God be the praise of lips and hearts that profess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our author writes:

*For here we have no lasting city; we are seeking one which is to come. Through him let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips which acknowledge his name (Heb.13:14-15).*

Not only must Christians worship through prayers of praise and thanksgiving, but their lives should be veritable altars from which pleasing acts arise to God--deeds of goodness and generosity, and the obedience that gives joy rather than sadness to Christian leaders. We read:

*Do not neglect good deeds and generosity; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over you as men who must render an account. So act that they may fulfill their task with joy, not with sorrow, for that would be harmful to you (Heb.13:16-17).*

The author encourages the sacrifice of obedience, which is the sacrifice of the human will. It is for this reason that the Scriptures teach *“obedience is better than sacrifice.”* The author confirms the teaching of First Peter that Christians share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. We read:

*Come to him, a living stone, rejected by men but approved, nonetheless, and precious in God’s eyes. You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You, however, are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works” of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light (1Pt.2:4-5,9).*

Our author reminds his readers of the necessity of supporting one another with prayer. He personally seeks through the intercession of their prayers the grace to persevere and to re-join them again soon. He asks:

*Pray for us, we are confident that we have a good conscience, wishing, as we do, to act rightly in every respect. I especially ask your prayers that I may be restored to you very soon (Heb.13:18-19).*

He asked for a charitable consideration of what he had briefly written to them and insisted that all had been written with the motive of encouraging them in the faith:

*My brothers, I beg you to bear with this word of encouragement, for I have written to you rather briefly. [Then he adds a bit of encouraging news.] I must let you know that our brother Timothy has been set free. If he is able to join me soon, he will be with me when I see you. [He closes with a general greeting to all.] Greetings to all your leaders, and to all the people of God. Grace be with you all (Heb.13:22-24).*

As this Epistle draws to a close, the author offers a final prayer for his readers in which he acknowledges the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and in which he professes Jesus to be not only Lord but the great Shepherd of the Church.

To the sacrifice of Jesus he attributes all possible spiritual achievement. To the union with Jesus he attributes all the graces needed to live and die in peace and holiness. He prays:

*May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord, furnish you with all that is good, that you may do his will. Through Jesus Christ may he carry out in you all that is pleasing to him. To Christ be glory forever! Amen (Heb.13:20-21).*

## EPILOGUE TO HEBREWS

The author of Hebrews has demonstrated how the Christian Religion is the one and true religion for all mankind. It alone perfectly fulfills the end and purpose of religion.

The author contrasted the Jewish and Christian Religions. In this contrast he presented the Jewish Religion as an earthly copy and shadow of true religion.

The true and eternal religion is Christianity, with Jesus Christ as its heart and center. He presents Jesus Christ as the perfect high priest who offers the perfect sacrifice of Himself, which begins on the Cross of Calvary and ends with Jesus entering into the heavenly sanctuary with the Precious Blood of atonement. There the perfect sacrifice and offering of Jesus becomes an eternal act never to be repeated--never needed to be repeated. The sacrifice of Jesus completely satisfies for sin and merits all the graces necessary for the salvation of all mankind.

The Cross of Christ becomes the altar of perfected religion before which the redeemed stand before as a royal priesthood to offer to Jesus praise, and to God, hearts obedient to His Will. Here the author of Hebrews ends his revelation. The author does not deal with how this eternal reality is expressed in time and applied to individual persons being saved on earth, where one thing follows upon another. However, he has said:

*Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood which does not pass away. Therefore he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives to make intercession for them (Heb.7:24-25).*

“To approach God through him” signifies worship of God through Jesus Christ.

The Lord’s Supper represents in time this eternal sacrifice. Perhaps our author never understood this truth himself. Since time does not permit, we will only briefly recall the teachings of Scripture and the Church on this doctrine. The Scriptures confirm that Jesus enacted a ritual celebration of his death at the Last Supper. Matthew records:

*During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. “Take this and eat it,” he said, “this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. “All of you must drink from it,” he said, “for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt.26:26-28).*

Jesus commanded this ritual to be perpetuated in the Church with these words: “Do this as a remembrance of me” (Lk.22:19). With these words he gave the Apostles the power to reenact the Last Supper, thereby establishing

**this ritual celebration within the Church, and simultaneously calling the Apostles into the ritual priesthood of the New Covenant. From the earliest teachings of St. Paul, we know the Church understood that communion with the Body and Blood of Jesus occurred through the ritual celebration of the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote:**

*Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf... You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and likewise the table of demons (1Cor.10:16-17,21).*

**Paul spoke of the Eucharist as sacrificial food by comparing it with pagan sacrificial food. Moreover, Paul taught the reenactment of the Lord's Supper to be a ritual proclamation of the death of Jesus. "Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes!" (1Cor.11:26).**

**This actually implies that the Lord's Supper proclaims and effects the forgiveness of sin. Today this ritual celebration is called the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Catholic Church teaches it as a doctrine of Faith:**

*In the Sacrifice of the Mass, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is made present, its memory is celebrated, and its saving power is applied. In the Sacrifice of the Mass the sacrificial gift and the primary sacrificing priest are identical with the sacrifice of Calvary--only the nature and mode of the offering differs. In this sacrifice, God grants the grace and gift of penance, and remits sins however grievous they may be (Council of Trent).*

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# **INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

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Commentary by: James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

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Note: A few studies are available only in 3-ring binders. One copy each of the Teacher's Manual and Student Manual are purchased, and copies of the student manual must be made for each participant.

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY CLASS FORMAT

### First Hour - Small Group Sharing:

- Students break into their small groups (10 or fewer participants)
- Prayer said aloud together (Example: Prayer to the Holy Spirit)
- Songs can be sung
- Sharing begins (approximately 45 minutes)
- Stretch / Break for coffee etc. (10-15 minutes)

### Second Hour – Lecture:

- Prayer said aloud by lecturer.
- Lecture begins for the following week's study (approximately 45-60 minutes)

### Total Class Time - 2 Hours Each Week

The study can be adapted for 10 to 400 people. Committed people needed may vary depending upon the number of students.

### Recommended Personnel:

- Lecturer: To present the material
- Small Group Leader: One for every 10 people sharing answers.
- Secretary: Functions might include making copies of materials (not required if participants each have their own spiral bound student book), distributing copies as required; advertising; registration; collecting fees (where applicable for materials, etc.)

### Purpose:

The motivating purpose for the formation of the Bible Study is to preserve and impart the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. Since "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ," is there anything more important for a sincere Christian than a study of the Scriptures?

### Recommended Work Assignments for Parish Studies

#### Secretary

Will place announcement of day, time and location in the Sunday bulletin beginning four weeks prior to the Bible Study beginning. A flyer can also be posted on the parish bulletin board.

Accept registrations by mail, phone, through the parish office or personally.



Collect fee, if applicable, at the first session of the Bible Study. The registration fee can be used to defray the cost of the study (workbooks printing, coffee etc.) and is also a form of commitment by persons attending to complete the study. You may choose to have a “love offering” bowl for ongoing costs, i.e., coffee etc.

Be responsible for coffee, treats at break.

Each week reproduce the Summaries/Worksheets for entire group and distribute to each small Group Leader (This may be done by rectory personnel). This is not necessary if each student purchases a personal workbook.

### **Group Leader**

Through years of experience, it has been found that it is best to strictly follow the discipline listed below.

--After community prayer, group shares worksheet answers for the week.

--Working in a clockwise order, the student to left of the leader answers the first question. The leader then asks if anyone has an additional or different answer. Move then to the next student, who answers question number (2) and so on, through all the questions for the week. The leader should help ensure answers are in accordance with the Catholic Church. If in doubt, check it out!

--It is the group leader's responsibility to confine discussion to the subject matter being dealt with in the weekly lesson. (Sharing problems or special prayers can be done after lesson is completed) If extraneous discussion is not regulated, the questions will not be answered in the time allotted.

--If a student has a question on the subject and no agreement can be reached, put that student in charge of finding the answer through a priest or any Catholic resource. The answer is to be brought back to the group the following week. (The leader should research the question as well.)

--ONLY students who have done their written homework may participate in the discussion. Others are encouraged to attend, listen, and write down the answers. There is much to be learned from one another, so incomplete homework is no reason to stay away. On the other hand, sharing off-the-cuff (without prayerful study and written answers) has proven too often to be disruptive and misleading.

--If the student is self-centered and tries to dominate the discussion, the group leader must speak to him privately and gently explain the problem, requesting his cooperation within the study guidelines. If the student persists in unacceptable behavior, that student is asked to remain silent or leave the study. (It is better to lose one destructive student than to lose the entire group.)

- Try to bring out the best in each student.
- Occasionally there is just one correct answer; when that is given, do not allow haggling, just move on to the next question.
- At the end of the discussion period, distribute next week's Summary/Worksheet for the students' home study (not required if participants have purchased individual workbooks).
- If time runs out before ALL questions are answered, BREAK anyway. People need the coffee break in order to move around and relax. This is very important. The student needs to be refreshed and ready to concentrate on the upcoming lecture. This should seldom occur. Manage your time; a student may really need an answer to the last question. Time allowed is 45 minutes for small group sharing.
- The first night of the study is a good time to explain the expectations of the group. We share as a community in love, kindness and consideration. This is not just an intellectual study.

### **Lecturer**

Open with a short prayer.

Prepare (rehearse / edit) and deliver the commentary on Sacred Scriptures for the week. Present the material with personal enthusiasm.

Each lesson contains a great deal of material. The lecturer should read and rehearse ahead of time for a most effective presentation. It need not all be presented. Time allowed is 45-60 minutes per lecture.

You may also elect to play Fr. O'Bryan's recorded tapes or CD's. These are available wherever the studies are sold. They are also excellent for personal review and reflection. (Note: many groups have done years of lessons listening to Father's original recordings...they are great!)

**Total Class Time - 2 Hours Each Week!**

## **ESTABLISHING A CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY IN YOUR PARISH**

### **The Catholic Bible Study: INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DICIPLESHIP**

By James P. O'Bryan S.T.

This Bible Study is designed to be presented by the laity but it may also be presented by religious. The number of participants will determine whether the study should be presented in the parish hall, class-rooms, or in homes. Some parishes have fifty or more people wanting to attend. (When this study was first presented by Fr. O'Bryan, it drew from the entire diocese, not from just one parish. There were 200 people at both the morning and evening session for the seven years...that's right, 400 people each week attended the study in one place.)

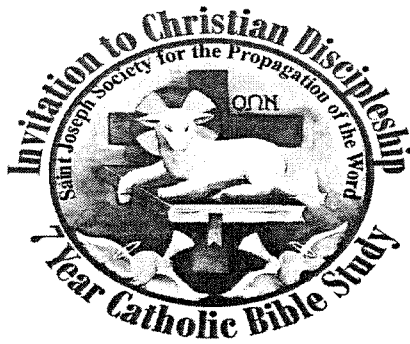
Many groups, large and small, still prefer to use the original (and recommended), method because it provides the fullness of the work. First, the full lecture, or an edited version, is presented by a "lecturer". The lecturer should spend time in prayerful preparation each week before presenting the material, and it should be presented with enthusiasm. Tapes and CDs of Father's original lectures are also available for purchase. They often are used in place of a lecturer. Listening to his recorded lectures at leisure, and being able to pause and replay them provides a wealth of information each week.

The homework portion of the study calls us to obedience and daily prayer as we strive to complete our assignment. Homework is a major factor in our personal spiritual growth. How much time will you give to God? The recommended method requires 2 hours each week as a group and additional study time at home, but the rewards are tremendous. This format may be used in homes or parishes.

A variation on the above, used successfully with High School groups (as large as 50) and adults, is to present the Summaries in place of the full lecture. Homework is assigned, answers are shared in a group, and then the Summary is read for the following week. All students have their printed assignments or workbooks. Homework may be trimmed to one or two questions per day for high schoolers (they already have homework to do). This method can reduce a session to about one hour total rather than 2 hours. This method is useful for severely time-challenged people, but the summaries only include about 20% of the complete lecture. However, the purchase of the recorded lectures which can be listened to during the week may be useful in providing a fuller experience for those who are unable to attend the full sessions.

A more recent method has also been successful for small home groups. Instead of using the Lectures and a lecturer, only the Bible and the Summary/Worksheets or Meditation Workbooks are used. Group members take turns reading aloud the Summary and the Bible references in the workbook--answering the questions as they go along. This eliminates the requirement for homework. A leader is still necessary at each meeting--one leader can be chosen for the whole study, or the attendees can take turns. (Note: Again, listening to parts of the recorded lecture in free time during the week may be helpful in providing more than the 20% of information given in the Summary. Also, the homework portion, though a pain to many, has a place in our lives as we strive to be more obedient to God's call).

All of the above styles have proven to be successful for different people in different situations. Start one in your community today!



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ITEM	DESCRIPTION	\$\$\$	TAX	S&H	Chptrs
Scriptures, God's Invitation to Discipleship	3 Ring binder with lectures and worksheets (this is a 6 week introductory study)	\$25.00	\$1.94	\$9.00	6
Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$50.00	\$3.88	\$9.00	16-23
Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$5.00	16-23
Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$25.00	\$1.94	\$9.00	16-23
<b>Other N. T. works</b>					
Acts of the Apostles	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$50.00	\$3.88	\$9.00	22
Acts of the Apostles	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$5.00	22
Acts of the Apostles	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$25.00	\$1.94	\$9.00	22
Romans	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$40.00	\$3.10	\$9.00	12
Romans	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	12
Romans	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	12
Hebrews *	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$40.00	\$3.10	\$9.00	9
Hebrews *	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	9
Hebrews	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	9
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Corinthians	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	11
Corinthians	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	11
Galatians / Thessalonians**	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$50.00	\$3.88	\$9.00	16
Galatians / Thessalonians**	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$5.00	16
Galatians / Thessalonians	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$25.00	\$1.94	\$9.00	16
Revelation***	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$40.00	\$3.10	\$9.00	12
Revelation***	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	12
Revelation	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	12

\* Available early September; \*\* Available October; \*\*\* Available mid November. (All are available now in 3-ring binder form @ \$40 + tax + S&H)

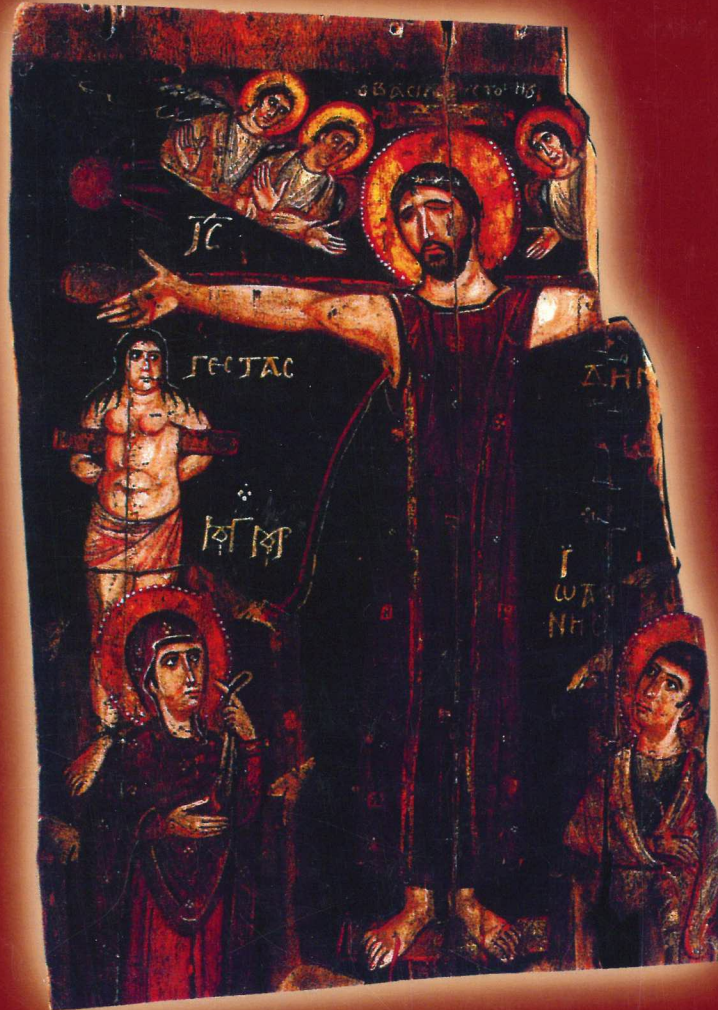
### **Other Catholic Teachings by Fr. O'Bryan**

Rock Foundation Revisited	8 1/2 x 11 workbook, Catholic Teachings	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	29
Christian with a Capital C	3-ring binder workbook, sequel to Rock Founda	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	30
The Inner Journey	8 1/2 x 11 workbook, Reflective Teachings	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	11
The Little Flower	8 1/2 x 11 The Life of St. Therese of Lisieux	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A
Garden of Eden	8 1/2 x 11 Work on Marriage / Engagement	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A
Where Eagles Fly	8 1/2 x 11 compilation of saints writings	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A
Christian Laity in the 21st Century	8 1/2 x 11 reflections on "The Easter People"	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A

### **LIBROS EN ESPANOL**

Most of the scripture studies shown above are available in Spanish. The Spanish versions are student workbooks in 3-ring binders 8 1/2" x 11". These may be ordered at the price of \$14+ \$1.09 tax + \$5 shipping & handling (\$20.09 total).





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