

Hebrews 1:1-4

AIM

1. To challenge our idea of Jesus's person and work. Is our understanding as complete as it should be?
2. To understand that though God still speaks he will have nothing new to say this side of heaven.

THE CONTEXT OF THE LETTER.

Described as 'a word of exhortation ... a short letter' (13:22) Hebrews begins formally, neither announcing it's author, who is being addressed, nor stating the relationship between them.

However the writer clearly has some personal knowledge of, and is pastorally sensitive to, the original situation of his readers (cf. 5:11-6:3, 6:9-12, 10:32-39, 12:4-13). The orderly and systematic treatment of the person and work of Christ based on an exposition of key OT texts applied to his readers situation (eg Ps 8:2-6 in 2:5-18; Ps 95:7-11 in 3:7-12ff etc.) and his use of a rhetorical style (cf. 2:1, 5:11, 6:9 etc.) lead many to believe that he was a preacher seeking to apply scripture to a particular group of Christians whom he knew and about whom he was concerned.

Although this group is nowhere named we do learn a number of things about them:

- they had been Christians for some time (5:12) and had suffered for their faith (10:32-34).
- at least some of their number were in danger of drifting away from the gospel (2:1) and missing out on heaven (3:7-4:11).
- some had withdrawn from regular gatherings with other Christians (10:24-25).
- some were weary and needed encouragement to keep going as Christians (10:35-39, 12:1-13).

His particular concerns for them and how he seeks to address them will become clearer as the letter progresses.

CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

Introduction	Christ our perfected High Priest	Implications
1:1	3:1	10:19

1:1-4 serves in many ways as a brief overture to the whole letter. All the principal themes are alluded to in this succinct yet profound summary of the person and work of Christ. A key aspect of these opening verses, and the whole argument of the book, is the high priestly work of Christ (1:3, cf. 2:17, 4:14ff).

THE SON AS REVEALER v1-2

A contrast is drawn between how God had previously revealed himself in the OT (v1) and how he had now revealed himself through his Son (v2). The force of these opening verses is not so much that God had spoken - that is taken for granted - but the vast inequality between those through whom he had spoken. This is made explicit in v4 (and developed further in 1:5-14).

It was generally believed that when God spoke to Moses at Sinai he did so with angels as his messengers (cf. Acts 7:38, 53: Galatians 3:19). Now, however, he has spoken through his Son. The reason for this comparison will become clear later (2:1ff, 2:5ff).

These verses are often used to argue that God has nothing more to say than he has already said : that the church is not to expect or look for further revelation from God this side of heaven. The argument for this is implicit rather than explicit, however three things suggest that this is indeed the case:

- i. The term 'last days' refers not, as we might read it, to 'recent times' but means literally 'this final age'. The Christ event and the revelation that accompanied it marks the end of one age and the inauguration of the 'final age' (cf. 9:28b). There is not another age this side of heaven - therefore there will be no more new revelation.
- ii. The Son's work is now complete (1:3 - He sits down cf. 10:11-12). God's saving activity in history has always required explanation but now that his saving work is complete there is nothing more to do, and hence nothing new to say.
- iii. In the past God's servants - the prophets (1:1) and angels (1:7) - revealed much about His plan and purposes to have a people for Himself. But now God Himself has done everything required that they are fulfilled (1:3) what more could there be to add?

To say that there is nothing more to add is not to say that God has not got anything more to say. Rather it is to insist that what he says today is exactly what he has always said - and indeed he speaks in the present through the same word he spoke in the past (cf. 3:7-12f, 14ff). Having spoken he still speaks.

THE SON AS CREATOR v2

These opening verses echo Gen. 1. The preexistence of the Son and His activity in creation - the one 'through whom God created' (v2) - are affirmed. Christ is also the heir of everything which he, as God's agent, created. In fact these verses hint at God's ultimate purpose in creation, that of bringing all things into submission to his Son (1:3c, cf. 1:10, 11, 13; 2:5; 10:12b-13).

THE SON AS INHERITOR v2

He is 'heir of all things' - but they will be different. (An allusion here to Ps 2:7-8 will be expanded later - cf. 1:5ff). This is hinted at in 1:3. The eschatological goal of Christ's work will be further developed to become one of the main themes of the letter (cf. 1:12a, 2:5, 10; 11:16; 12:28; 13:14).

THE SON AS PURIFIER v3

For that inheritance to be established something radical must first be done. Abraham's descendants (2:16) must first be cleansed, a priestly act for which a new type of priest will be required.

Much of the central section of the letter (3:1-10:39) will deal with the high priestly work of Christ. Employing concepts and rituals drawn from the OT cult - priests, high priests, sacrifice, tabernacle - the writer will explain the significance of Christ's high priestly work and how embracing it will enable us to 'hold firmly to the faith we possess' and 'approach the throne of grace so that we receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need' (4:14, 16).

THE ENTHRONED SON v3

Once the work of cleansing had been done the Son sat down. The Son is exalted to a position at God's right hand (v3 cf. Heb 1:13, 8:1, 10:11-12) a position of unparalleled glory and power; a place where God alone can sit (1:3-4). From there he sustains all things (1:3) and waits for the completion of all things (1:13, 10:13).

The heavenly high priestly work of Christ and the heavenly enthronement of Christ are two ideas central to the writer's concerns.

IMPLICATIONS

As the writer alternates between teaching and exhortation throughout the letter (eg. cf. (1:1-14 & 2:1-5) we will not have to wait too long to see how he applies his theology.

For now it is worth spending some time reflecting on how he introduces Jesus at the beginning of the letter:

How do the categories with which he describes Christ and his work compare with those we would think of first?

How does this reveal our thinking to be different from the writer? Why is he thinking in these terms? Why don't we think as he does?

How might this difference reflect a poverty in our understanding of God and his work in Christ?

Hebrews 1:5-2:4

AIM

To understand the significance of the Son being the enthroned heavenly King.

CONTEXT

From 1:5-2:18 the writer concentrates on the relationship between angels and the Son, first mentioned in 1:4. Their relationship is significant because of the implications it has for the importance for the revelation of which they had been the mediators (2:1-3).

STRUCTURE

1:5-14 The pre-eminent messenger
2:1-4 His pre-eminent message

THE PRE-EMINENT MESSENGER (1:5-14)

This section picks up on many of the themes introduced in 1:1-4.

However Ps 110:1, alluded to in 1:3 and quoted in full in 1:13, provides the context within which to understand the intervening verses, the main thrust of which is the heavenly enthronement of the Son.

The seven quotations are presented as a succession of words spoken by God to his Son. In a series of comparisons the respective status of the Son and angels are made clear.

v5-7 :

Jesus, God's eternal Son (1:2-3) is the one who ultimately fulfils these scriptures. Descended from David (for a while 'a little lower than angels' (2:7)) but now raised from the dead, ascended and exalted at the right hand of God ("crowned with glory and honour" (2:9)), he is restored to his rightful place from where he rules (1:3).

The linking of Ps 2:7 (a Messianic psalm prophesying the establishment of God's Son as King) and 2 Sam 7:14 (the promise that God would establish David's son / His Son as eternal ruler of his kingdom) affirms the Messiah as both Son of God and Son of David. The Son is God's eternal king. Angels, his servants, worship him (v6-7).

The reference to Christ entering the world to receive the worship of angels (v6) refers not to his incarnation but to his enthronement in heaven and exaltation to the 'right hand of God'. The focus here - as in so much of Hebrews - is not on this world but on the world to come (cf. 2:6).

v8-14

The basis for the assertion that the Son is pre-eminent is made clear. The eternal king rules forever (8). This stands in contrast to the created order - of which angels are but a part - which the Son himself had made and which he will eventually 'role up' (12).

The Father addresses the Son as both God and Lord. In contrast angels serve Christians (14) - in a way the writer does not elaborate!

THE PRE-EMINENT MESSAGE (2:1-4)

But why all this concern about angels? They figure prominently in ch 1 & 2 (1:4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14; 2:2, 5, 7, 16) and then disappear from view, to be mentioned, almost incidentally only at the end of the letter (12:22, 13:2). As often in Hebrews, we don't have to wait long for the writer to apply his teaching. The importance of establishing their relative status to the Son lies in the implications this has for the significance of the revelation they mediated (2:1-4).

Although not made explicit in the OT, the NT alludes to the fact that the revelation given to Moses at Mt. Sinai was mediated through angels (2:2, cf. Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19). The preeminence of the Son means that what he has to say (2:2, cf. 1:1) is of even greater consequence than that which had gone before. If what God had revealed through angels in the past needed to be taken note of - and it did (2:2) - how much more important must it be to listen to the Son.

THE WARNING

Ch 2:1-4 is the first of a number warnings in the letter that express the writers concern for (some / all of?) his readers. They appeared to be at risk of turning their backs on the gospel.

The argument is that if very 'violation and disobedience' of the Mosaic covenant - the earlier 'angelic' revelation - received its just punishment how can there be any escape for those who ignore what the Son has now revealed? The implication is that the judgment facing those who reject Christ must be even more certain and even more severe than any punishment experienced by Israel in the OT. (The writer will elaborate on this theme later (eg. cf. 10:26-31)).

THE RESPONSE

What then must they do?

1. *Negatively* they must not drift away from this message they had received. They must keep 'going on going on'. The picture is of a boat that has lost its mooring / slipped its anchor and moving, perhaps even imperceptibly, away from Christ and towards disaster.

2. *Positively* they must pay more careful attention to what they had heard, the message of salvation first proclaimed by Christ, relayed to the writer and his readers by those who had heard him and confirmed by God by 'various signs, wonders and various miracles' (2:3-4).

It is important to note that the writer includes himself in the warning of 2:1- 4 (cf. 2:1 & 3). Like them he needs to ensure that he is holding on to the gospel. The danger of 'drifting' and ignoring God's message of salvation is not limited to his audience. Whilst it is important, as we study the letter, to seek to understand the situation into which the letter was written this must not blind us to the universal application of the writers message.

Our writer will have more to say on the 'how and why' of 'drifting' later on in the letter. For now the emphasis is on the disastrous consequences of so doing and how to avoid it.

SUPERIOR & IMPORTANT : INFERIOR & IRRELEVANT?

If the Son is 'superior to the angels' (1:4) and this is reflected in the importance of listening to his message (2:1, 3) does that mean that the previous revelation is 'inferior'. If so to what extent is it still relevant. If it has now been surpassed can it now be ignored?

Although the writer to the Hebrews has gone to some lengths to prove the superiority of the Son to angels and drawn out the implications of this for the rejecting of what the Son has revealed, he has not said that the previous revelation was inferior - except in the limited sense of being incomplete.

It is still God's word (cf. 15, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13) and is still relevant. Indeed the writer has spent most of ch 1 using it to prove his case! However implied here, and argued at length later on, is the assertion that it can, and must, now be understood only within the context of the now complete revelation. Already in the letter what 'God spoke through the prophets' (1:1) can be seen as subservient, in some sense, to what Christ has revealed, since the exhortation in 2:1-4 is to hold on to what he, not they, have said.

There is thus both continuity, and discontinuity, between what God has revealed in the past through the prophets and what he has now revealed through the Son. Much of Hebrews will be concerned in delineating the exact nature of this relationship and exhorting us to embrace it's significance for how we should live 'in these last days' (1:2).

IMPLICATIONS

The status of the Son and the exhortation to hold on to his message is as relevant to us as to the original readers.

- How do we view the Son? Do we understand that he is now enthroned in heaven awaiting the completion of all things? How does our thinking need to change?
- How do we view his message? Are we drifting away? How can we pay more careful attention to what we have heard?

Hebrews 2:5-3:6

AIM

To understand that by becoming man Jesus has achieved a certain future for all those who look to him.

CONTEXT

The writer has been comparing the Son to angels to demonstrate that he is the exalted king and thus underline the importance of listening to him. He now compares them again, this time to highlight his humanity and his suffering. In so doing he is encouraging his readers to hold on to

what the Son has revealed because of the world to come (cf. 1:2, 6, 13, 2:3, 5, 3:1, 6, 14, 4:1, 11). Jesus has made the future secure. He sits at the father's right hand. They can be confident in him (1:3, 3:6).

STRUCTURE

2:5-9 Jesus made man will rule in the future.

2:10-18 Jesus' humanity secures our future.

3:1-6 Jesus' faithfulness assures us of our future.

JESUS, MADE MAN, WILL RULE IN THE FUTURE (2:5-9)

The comparison between Jesus and angels begun in 1:4 continues. In 2:5 the reference to the world to come links back to Ps 110:1 in 1:13. The world to come will be subjected to Jesus not angels.

The reference to Ps 8 has a dual purpose. It emphasises

i. Jesus as ruler (2:7, 8).

Jesus is now exalted at the Father's right hand (1:3, 13). The world to come is subject to him (2:5). Jesus 'made a little lower than the angels' (2:7, 9) has been seen in his incarnation (2:3) and in his resurrection and ascension has been 'crowned with glory and honour' (2:7, 9), but we don't yet see all things subject to him (2:8). The 'until' in 1:13 alludes to the delay between Jesus finishing his work - sitting down - and the final revelation of his universal rule when his enemies will be made 'a footstool' cf. 1:13, 2:8.

However Jesus' position, though not yet universally acknowledged, is one of supreme glory and honour. He has attained it because he was obedient unto death so that all peoples might be saved (2:9).

ii. Jesus the man (2:7, 9).

The comparison with angels now has a new emphasis. Jesus is made lower than angels. The incarnation is an aspect of Jesus' obedient suffering. Psalm 8 in its original context refers to humankind in its pre-fall state. Here the writer uses it to emphasise Jesus' full humanity. He will go on to elaborate the necessity for the Son to become man (2:10-18) a basic element of which was to suffer death (2:9) to achieve our salvation (2:3).

JESUS' HUMANITY SECURES OUR FUTURE (2:10-18)

The implications of Jesus's humanity

1. He was our pioneer (2:10)

The word 'author' in 2:10 carries with it both the ideas of initiator and achiever. Jesus the the pioneer is the leader who goes before his people leading them to heaven. He is the leader who delivers God's sons.

2. He was qualified to save us (2:10)

'Perfected' is a technical term in Hebrews. It does not refer to any moral or ethical quality. Rather it contains the idea of being 'qualified'. By becoming man and treading the path of obedient suffering to the cross and then to glory he is supremely qualified to achieve his people's salvation.

3. He destroyed the devil (2:14)

It was important that Jesus become 'flesh and blood' to destroy the devil. This is a reference to the promise of God in Gen 3:15 to destroy the serpent. Jesus, the ideal man of Ps 8, is the representative Adam who is able to reverse the curses which were a consequence of the fall.

4. He frees us from the fear of death (2:15).

Jesus has tasted death for everyone (2:9). He has destroyed the devil who held the power of death. Because he is the great pioneer who leads the way we no longer need to be trapped by our fear of the future. The writer wants us to be confident not fearful. This will become one of the themes of the letter - cf 3:1, 6, 4:14-16, 10:19- 22, 12:18-240.

5. He is our priest (2:17)

There is now explicit mention of the great theme that will dominate much of the rest of Hebrews - Jesus our high priest. Here he mentions briefly the atonement Jesus makes for the sins off the people. The writer will have much more to say about Christ's high priestly work. Here the emphasis is that to do this task he had to be fully human.

6. He is our help in temptation (2:18).

The thrust of v18, poorly reflected in the NIV, is that the sufferings of Christ - whether in prospect or experience - were a temptation for him to give up. The use of Ps 22:22 in 2:12 reminds us of this suffering. He can thus identify with his brothers who are also tempted to give up (10:32-39). He is also qualified to become our high priest and bring salvation (2:10) and help us so we do not give up (cf. 4:14). The faithfulness of Christ continues as a theme in 3:1-6.

JESUS' FAITHFULNESS ASSURES OUR FUTURE (3:1-6)

This passage is a bridge section. It applies the previous teaching and introduces a new comparison between Jesus and Moses. Although Moses was also, in some respects, a pioneer, who led a people to the promised land (2:9, 10, 3:16) Jesus is far greater, since:

- he is the builder of the house whereas Moses is only like the house itself (ie God created Moses, but Jesus is the one through whom God created everything)
- he is the Son of the house while Moses is only a servant in the house (3:5-6a).
- he was the one to whom Moses pointed (3:5b).

This serves to underline the main point of comparison that God's revelation through Jesus is much greater than that through Moses (cf 2:2-4). For Moses testified to what would be said in the future.

The writer also emphasises Jesus' faithfulness. It is because he has been faithful in his ministry that we can be certain of our future - if we 'hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast' (3:6ff).

IMPLICATIONS

The application is explicit in 3:1. 'Fix your thoughts on Jesus'. Jesus, God's messenger and the Son who makes God's people holy (the apostle and high priest) is the one on whom we are to fix our thoughts.

'Courage' (3:6) is better translated as 'confidence'. We have good reason to be confident and a certain hope to boast in because Christ has been and is faithful.

For reflection:

What does it mean in practical terms to fix our eyes upon Jesus?

Do we have confidence in our future because of Jesus' achievement, or are we still fearful?

Hebrews 3:7-4.13

AIM

To understand the appropriate response to God's word

To see the importance of encouraging one another to keep doing it - and to begin to think how we might do just that!

CONTEXT

The faithfulness of Christ to the mission God had given him (2:10ff) and specifically his High Priestly work (2:17) gives his people courage to approach God (2:6, cf. 4:16). The writer has argued that we need to hold on to this confidence (and exercise it) to persist in believing the promises of God and thus receive what he has promised (2:6)

The proper and improper response to God's word is explained by reference to Ps 95 where the response of God to the Israelites in the past is a warning to his people in the present.

STRUCTURE

The exposition on Ps 95 takes the form of a sermon in which two principle points are first proved and then applied. In making these two points he combines both encouragements to persevere and warnings of the danger of not doing so.

3:7-11	The text
3:12-19	To be one of God's people you must keep believing His promise
4:1-11	The promise is about heaven
4:12-13	Summary : Your response to God's word reveals where you stand

You must keep believing God's promise to receive it.

3:7-11

Our writer has 3 groups of people in view as he expounds Ps 95.

- i. The Israelites who had been rescued from Egypt and were on the verge of entering the promised land but failed to do so because of unbelief (Nu 13-14).
- ii. Later generations of Israelites who looked back to the experiences of their ancestors for what it revealed about God and the response his word demanded (Ps 95)
- iii. Those to whom he was writing.

NUMBERS 13-14

Although the desert generation often tested God and 'their hearts were always going astray' (4:10. cf. Ps 95:10, Nu 14:22b) the writer to the Hebrews has the events of Nu 13-14 particularly in mind. This is evident from:

- his translation of the place names Meribah and Massah (Ps 95:8) as 'rebellion' and 'testing' (3:8), shifting the emphasis from the particular events that occurred there (cf. Ex 17:1-7, Nu 20:2-13) to Nu 14 where the underlying principle is brought into sharp relief
- reference to God's oath (4:11. cf. Nu 14:20-23, 28-35).

Thus he compares the experience of Christians not to a long period of wandering in the desert but to the situation of a people whose pilgrimage was almost over and were on the verge of attaining all that God had promised.

Their fundamental failure was their refusal to believe that God was with them directing them through his word. They forgot the past and His acts of redemption, refused to trust His promises, and turned away (cf. Ex 3:7, Nu 14:2-4).

For anyone tempted to give up as they stood on the verge of receiving that for which they had been saved, Israel's past failure served as a warning not to fall at the last.

PSALM 95

The first half of the psalm issues a summons to God's people to come before Him as the great creator God who rules over all the earth (echoing some of the themes of ch1) . The second half of the psalm - and the verses that our writer expounds - issue a warning that as they do so they must not follow the example of the desert generation.

(The psalm was used commonly in the synagogue to summon the congregation to worship, as a sober reminder to each generation of the awesome responsibility of those who come to meet God in his word.)

3:12-19

The writer applies the warning of Ps 95 to his readers. What the Holy Spirit said through David to the Israelites of his and subsequent generations He also said to the Hebrew Christians (cf. 3:7, 12, 4:1, 11-13). Sin is the refusal to believe God and act on his promise. It can deceive them. (It is viewed here as an external agent, an active aggressive power exerting an influence (3:13) that can either be indulged or opposed (3:7, 15, 4:7).) They were similarly at risk of turning away from God (3:10 cf. Ps 95:10).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Holding on 'to the hope of which we boast' (3:6) is not just a question of individual watchfulness but corporate activity (4:13. cf. 10:23-25). The writer wants his fellow believers to have such a care for one another that none will be lost. There is a need for a commitment to understand and help each other to keep listening, believing and obeying what God has revealed. This word based ministry is neither limited to formal gatherings ('encourage one another daily') nor is it a task for 'leaders' alone - it is everyone's responsibility, each for each other.

HOW LONG FOR?

The need of everyone for daily encouragement to hold on to God's promises will continue for 'as long as it is called today' [ie. until Christ returns (cf. 9:28,10:35-39)] since the danger of deception by sin will persist until then. As at the time of the Exodus the majority of Israelites failed. They

- rebelled against God (3:16) cf. Ps 95:7-8 Nu 14:13, 19, 22
- sinned against God (3:17) cf. Ps 95:10 Nu 14:10, 29, 32
- refused to obey God (3:18 cf. Ps 95:11 Nu 14:30, 33, 43

The Hebrew Christians are faced with the same alternative as they were: to persevere in faith and obedience or to fall back to unbelief and disobedience. If they were to avoid the latter they will need daily to encourage one another to persevere.

The promise still stands - & it's about heaven

Our writer continues to expound Ps 95 with his eyes on Israel's unbelief in refusing to enter Caanan (4:2, 6, 11). However in 4:1-13 the warning is tempered by the assertion that Israel's failure didn't negate either the promise of or the attainability of the rest. He exhorts his readers not to make the same mistake as they did (4:1, 11-13).

NOTHING HAS CHANGED

Those addressed - in Nu 14, Ps 95 and Hebrews - all received the same promises - salvation (2:3) / rest (4:1) for those who believe God will keep his promises (4:3, 6a,9) and the denial of such for those who refuse to trust Him (4:2b, 6b, 7, 11). The 'Today' of Ps 95 is an ever present 'today'. What the Holy Spirit said to a different audience in the past He continues to say to the audience of today (cf. 3:7). The warning and promise remain, and it is the response to that same word that reveals where anyone stands and ultimately determines their end (4:12-13).

IT'S ABOUT HEAVEN - AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN

At first sight the promise of rest of Ps 95 might seem to be Caanan. However the writer argues that this cannot be the case since:

- i. Ps 95, spoken by David hundreds of years after Joshua led the next generation of Israelites into the land, was still warning the Israelites that they risked not entering it if they turned away from God in unbelief (4:7-8).
- ii. The rest spoken of is 'my rest' (4:3), speaking of that rest into which God entered on after the completion of creation (Gen 2:2, cf. 4:4-5) - 'the state of completion and harmony experienced by God after His creative labour is the archetype and goal of all subsequent experiences of rest' (Lane).

SO KEEP GOING

The exhortation of 4:11 presupposes 4:3. The task of the community is to enter God's promised rest through faith in God's promise and obedient response to the voice of God in scripture 4:11-13. If, in the face of suffering and opposition, the task seems impossible remember

- the responsibility that everyone get there is corporate (4:13)

- that Jesus has led the way to bring his people home (2:10-18)
- and ... (the writer will have more to say on how Jesus helps his people in the time of testing from 4:14 onwards.)

IMPLICATIONS

What things make me tempted to doubt God's promises? When don't I want to believe what He has said? Where are my weak spots? Where am I most vulnerable?

How can I avoid being deceived? How can I help others from being deceived?

How can I encourage others to persevere?

Do I expect persevering to be hard work (4:11)? How can I help others in this task?

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

AIM

To understand that Jesus has faced suffering in temptation and is qualified to help us.

To have confidence to approach God knowing Jesus understands our temptations and is able to help.

CONTEXT

So far in his letter the writer to the Hebrews has sought to encourage his readers to persevere in the Christian life by reminding them of the message that they had received about who Jesus is (chapter 1) and what he has done (Chapter 2). He has also warned them of the dangers of not going on with the gospel by citing examples from their Jewish past (chapter 3&4). They must not be disobedient but make every effort to hold on to the message concerning Christ and encourage one another so to do.

Lest they be overwhelmed by this responsibility the writer now goes on to remind them that Jesus has led the way. He begins to describe Jesus's High Priesthood to encourage his readers to endure in their struggle against sin and unbelief.

STRUCTURE

The writer concentrates on Jesus' priesthood. He shows that Jesus is the genuine priest, but draws out one distinguishing mark - Jesus is a sinless priest. We should gain our confidence from understanding the nature of Jesus' priesthood.

4:14-16 Our merciful high priest

5:1-10 Our qualified high priest

The fact that He came with God's authority (v5-6,10), persevered to the end (5:7-10) and is now in heaven (4:14) able to empathise with their own situation should give the Hebrew Christians great heart. He committed Himself to God's will and His prayers were heard (5:7). Our writer is urging his readers to do likewise (4:16). They too can persevere if they hold on to that which they have received (4:14) and approach the throne of grace with confidence to receive help in their time of need (4:17).

JESUS THE MERCIFUL HIGH PRIEST (4:14-16)

Because Jesus has already persevered through suffering to glory (v14-15) He can, as High Priest, empathise with those who are struggling to follow after Him and help them in their time of trial. The Hebrew Christians must not despair - as indeed they might have been tempted to if

they dwelt too long on the examples from their past (3:7-4:12) - but have confidence to approach God and receive help in their time of need. They must hold on to the faith that they profess (14) and have confidence in what Christ has done (16).

The challenge to approach the throne of grace with confidence is based particularly on the teaching that Jesus is able to sympathise with our weaknesses. He is enthroned with God as the heavenly ruler whose throne is characterised by grace. Jesus has fulfilled that to which the ritual of the day of atonement pointed (to be described in more detail in later chapters). We can draw near to God, in new covenant relationship, directly in prayer, seeking mercy for past failures and grace to help us in our time of need.

JESUS OUR QUALIFIED HIGH PRIEST (5:1-10)

Christ is a genuine High Priest (5:1) - a man (cf. 2:9,14,17), appointed by God (5:5,6,10), able to deal gently with those who suffer from the temptation to give up (4:15-16) - whilst at the same time being very different from His predecessors. He is 'of the order of Melchizedek' (v10) not as they had been of the 'order of Aaron' (cf. 7v11).

The empathy that he has with those for whom He intercedes comes not from the sins which they share - as was the case with the other 'Aaronic' high priests (5:2-3) - but from the fact that He too was tempted to give up treading the path of obedience (v7-10). He experienced in his earthly ministry similar pressures and temptations to give up that the Hebrew Christians were now facing (4:15). He longed to be spared the path of suffering that God had chosen for him. However he submitted himself to God and his prayers were heard (5:7). He was enabled to persevere to the end and it was this very obedience that secured salvation for all those that follow Him (v9) - to all those who persevere despite the opposition that they face (cf. 4:11).

Jesus was always sinless (4:15) yet He had to learn the experience of what obedience to God involved in practical terms - in the conditions of human life on earth - so that he could sympathise with those similarly tested as well as teach us by example (5:8).

It was by going the way that his brothers would afterwards follow (cf. 2:10ff) that he was qualified, or made completely adequate, or 'perfect' (5:9) as the high priest and saviour of his people.

IMPLICATIONS

Do I rejoice in the help Jesus can offer me in my battle to persevere?

Do I approach God with confidence in my time of need?

How can I encourage others to keep going as Christians (3:13)?

How can we help one another to hold firmly to our faith and be confident in Jesus?

Hebrews 5:11-6:20

AIM

- i. To understand the danger of not continuing work out how to live in the light of what Christ has done.

- ii. To understand human responsibility and God's sovereignty in salvation.

CONTEXT

The perfecting of Christ as saviour involved his persevering through suffering (2:10, 5:7-9). This identification with his people enables Him to help them when they suffer. When they are faced with the opposition that obedience to God brings and are tempted to buckle under the pressure, help is at hand (2:18, 5:9). However if they are to understand how they must first come to a mature understanding of what it means to say that Christ is their 'great high priest' (4:14, 10:21-23). Much of the central part of the letter is concerned with elaborating on just what this means (4:14-10:18).

However before he can go on to develop his theme (5:11. cf. 5:10, 7:1ff) there is first a *warning* that they need to keep on listen and believing (5:11- 6:12. cf. 2:1-4, 3:7ff) and the encouragement that God has done everything needed to keep us going to then end.

ARGUMENT

- 4:14-5:10 Jesus the High Priest can help you keep going ...
- 5:11-6:13 But you must keep listening to and living in the light of the Christ's work since it's persevering faith that saves
- 6:13-6:20 Hope is certain because God's is committed to it.

INFANTILE OR MATURE?

How does the writer view his readers: Are they still infants? Do they still need 'milk'? Do they need someone to teach them the elementary truths of the gospel all over again? Ch 5:12-13 might seem to suggest this but two things argue against it

- i. He refuses to teach them the elementary truths of the gospel again (6:1)
- ii. What he then goes on to give them (cf. 7:1ff) is 'solid food'. (And everything he has said from 1:5-5:10 is far from the 'elementary truths' of the gospel that brings someone into the family of Christ - cf. 6:1-2.)

He uses biting irony (5:12-13) in an attempt to shake them out of the danger of complacency and call them back to the conviction and boldness they had exhibited in the past. They had worked hard for the cause of the gospel and their love for the saints had witnessed to the genuineness of their faith (6:10, cf. 10:32-34). However now they were in a danger of drifting (2:1ff). They were facing with a choice - to persevere like their forebears and inherit eternal life (6:12, cf. ch11), or to continue to be 'lazy' (6:12) and risk losing out on what God had promised (6:4-8)?

A deeper understanding of Christ's work, and particularly his work as high priest and all that means, will help them keep going on. Hence though they are showing signs of immaturity (5:12) he intends to feed them solid food so they might, literally, 'be born along to maturity' (6:1).

LAZY OR DILIGENT?

'Lazy' (6:12) and 'slow to learn' (5:11) are more literally translated 'dull with respect to what is heard'. They were beginning to pay less attention to what they had heard (2:1). They needed to take on board the full implications of Christ high priesthood. He wants to tell them more (5:8-11), but they are in danger of not listening.

The thrust of 5:12-6:3 is:

'The immature don't understand the full significance of Christ's high priestly office. The mature must take it on board and live in the light of it. And I'm now going to tell you about it so you can grow in maturity and persevere'

(Teaching about righteousness (5:13) is synonymous with 'strong food' in 12 & 14 and refers specifically to what the writer will have to say about the high priesthood of Christ (7:1-10:18. cf. 5:10-11) which they need to take on board to help them persevere.)

The writers concern is to check any tendency they may have been to no longer listen to the message of Christ. They need to continue to listen to the gospel and to continue to believe it, whatever the costs and temptations of not so doing (6:12).

VULNERABLE OR SECURE?

The stark warning of 6:4-8 is that those who 'fall away' cannot be brought back to repentance? This begs two questions:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FALL AWAY?

Those who 'fall away' are those who, in rejecting Christ as deliberately as his executioners did, are openly putting themselves up as enemies of God (6:6). No hope is offered to those who take a continuous hard hearted stand against Christ. As in 3:12-13, those who harden their hearts against God may reach a point where they are 'hardened' beyond recall. They cannot be brought back to repentance as they are cutting themselves off from the only thing that can save them - Christ's (2:17).

TO WHOM DOES THE WARNING REFER?

Not (yet) to his readers - our writer was confident that even though they may be becoming sluggish they had not become apostate (6:9). However at least some of them must be at risk, or else there would be no point in the warning, or the exhortation of 6:11-12.

Pastorally, a third question raises itself:

CAN GENUINE BELIEVERS LOOSE THEIR SALVATION THEN?

The warning is to those who have 'been enlightened ... shared in the Holy Spirit ... tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age' (6:4-5). All these suggest he has in view those with a decisive and personal experience of the benefits of the new covenant and a foretaste of the world to come. Those who wish to argue that the warning is not directed at Christian readers must explain how a non-Christian can be said to have had such experiences.

It should be noted however that:

- The fact that the writer is confident that a true work of God has taken place in the congregation he addresses (6:9, cf. 10:39) doesn't mean that some of those he addresses aren't 'rebellious at heart and, unless things change, will find that they have reached the point of irremedial apostacy' (Hughes).
- Many (nearly all) of those who were rescued from Egypt failed to enter the promised land. They did so because though they had begun by trusting in God's word they did not continue to do so (cf. 3:16-17, 4:2). The genuineness of new birth is proved by persevering faith.
- Our authors aim is not to get us to look around at others and seek to judge whether or not they are apostate and therefore beyond being brought to repentance. Rather it is to look to *ourselves* and ask "Am I continuing to listen to the message of Christ.

Have I become slack? Do I need help in persevering? Am I willing to work hard at understanding what it means to have Christ as my High Priest and live in the light of that fact? (cf. 6:11-12).

The illustration of 6:7-8 clarifies his pastoral concern. There are ultimately only two options - to persist in hearing and obeying the word of God and, by God's grace, to be fruitful (6:7) or to harden ones heart in unbelief and turn away from God (6:8). There is no middle ground. To do the later is to risk condemnation (6:8). Our authors desire is that everyone perseveres to the end. His purpose in giving the warning is to check any tendency they might have to drift from their commitment to the gospel and be unreceptive to the implications for the claim of God on their lives.

CERTAIN & SURE

Lest concentrating on human responsibility in responding to God word lead to fear of failure our writer reminds us that the basis of Christian hope is not anything we might do but the solemn promise of God.

God's promise to Abraham in Gen 22:17 was confirmed with an oath (underlining the utter reliability of the God who promises). Abraham was thus encouraged to wait patiently for what was promised. Though part of that promise was fulfilled in his lifetime, the ultimate blessing came in the blessing of Jesus Christ only after his death (cf. 11:13, 39). God's complete commitment to achieving all he has promised for his people should encourage us that we will be enabled to persevere to the end.

God's oath confirming commitment to his promise should encourage us (6:18) and enable us to persevere. God however made a second oath that is just as important to understand - one establishing Christ as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:20-22, cf. Ps 110:4), and it is to this that our author now turns (6:19-20, 7:1ff).

IMPLICATIONS

To what extent are we in the same position as the original hearers?

Are we, individually, continuing to listen to God's word?

Are we being diligent or lazy in working out how to live in the light of it?

Are we keen to build onto the foundations of our Christian confession a mature understanding of the faith?

Am I certain I will persevere to the end? Should I be?

On what does my salvation depend, and why?

Hebrews 7:1-28

AIM

To understand how a more mature understanding of Christ's high priestly work will help us keep going as Christians

CONTEXT

Chapter 7 is central to our writer's argument. It represents the 'solid food' that suits the mature (5:12-14), that he has promised his readers (6:1-3) and that promotes the maturity he desires for them. Having sought to shake them out of their lethargy (5:11-6:12) he now returns to expounding the high priesthood of Christ (cf. 4:14, 5:4-6), the theme that will dominate the rest of the letter (eg. 7:1-10:18).

STRUCTURE

- 7:1-10 The greatness of Melchizedek the priest
- 7:11-28 Two orders of priesthood compared
- 7:11-19 The insufficient and temporary nature of the Levitical
- 7:20-28 The permanence and effectiveness of the 'Melchizedekian'

ARGUMENT

The writer's main concern in 7:1-28 is to establish the genuineness of Jesus' priesthood and prove its superiority to any Levitical priesthood. The basis for the argument is the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek in Gen 14:17-20 and God's oath in Ps 110:4. He sees these passages the clear implication that the Levitical priesthood would eventually be replaced by an eternal priesthood, one foreshadowed and prefigured by Melchizedek.

MELCHIZEDEK AND HIS PRIESTHOOD (7:1-10)

These verses serve as an introduction and 'warm up' to the argument of 7:11-28. The brief meeting between Abraham and the king of Salem, the giving of a tithe and the receiving of a blessing (Gen 14:17-20) establish both the existence of an authentic priesthood outside the Levitical line (6) and the preeminence of that priesthood (7-10)

Melchizedek's resemblance to Christ (3) lies not so much in the person himself. Rather they are seen in the details of the account of his meeting with Abraham.

- i. *His name* 'King of righteousness' and 'king of peace' (2), in name at least anticipating the Messiah's reign of righteousness and peace (cf. 1:8-9).
- ii. *His office* He is both king and priest (3) - it is clearly this aspect of the account of Gen 14 that the writer of Ps 110 has in mind when he envisages the appearance of another figure who will combine these two offices (cf. 7:13-16): a Davidic king and a priesthood not based on being a physical descendent of any known priest but nevertheless divinely appointed.
- iii. *His 'eternity'* He appears from nowhere and disappears without trace (3). He has no predecessors and no successors. No mention is made of his death. Arguing from the silence of scripture the writer sees a foreshadowing of Christ's never-ending priesthood.

It is this last aspect of his priesthood - its eternal nature - that is particularly significant for our writer (cf. 7:16, 17, 21, 24-25, 28), the implications of which he will go on to develop.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE OLD PRIESTHOOD (v11-19)

Ps 110:4 prophesies the coming of another priesthood, distinct from the Levitical one (11 cf. 13-17, 21). This was needed because 'perfection' could not be attained by it (11). For the first time in the letter the language of perfection (applied to Christ in 2:10, 5:9, 7:28) is applied to believers.

- The law of Moses made nothing perfect, but in Jesus Christ, a 'better hope is introduced by which we draw near to God' (19). 'Perfecting' here refers not so much to purity or flawlessness but to the 'qualifying' of believers to draw near to God and enjoy the certainty of a new covenant relationship with God. The writer has more to say about this later (cf. 9:9, 10:1, 10:14; 11:40, 12:23).
- The weakness of the Mosaic Law as a system by which people relate to God is linked to the weakness of the priesthood that supported it (11, 19). [The law is weak for Paul because man does *not* do it, whereas it is weak for Hebrews because *man* does it' (Gutbrod)]. A different (11,13,16), better (19) priest is required if 'perfection' is to be attained.
- The eternal nature of this different priest (16, 17, 21, 23-24, cf. 7:3) is a key difference and a crucial element of his superiority. The possibility of continuing in an eternal relationship with God is at the heart of the 'better hope' (18).

THE PERMANENCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE 'NEW' PRIESTHOOD (20-28)

The superiority of Christ's priesthood is seen in that:

i. It was confirmed with an oath

No such oath was associated with the appointment of the levitical priests. God's oath attached to his promise makes 'the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear' (6:19). The oath makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant: Jesus' (eternal) priestly ministry continues to vouch for the fact that the blessings of the new covenant of which he is the mediator (8:6, 9:15, 12:24) are readily available.

ii. It is eternal

The levitical priesthood was appointed as an 'everlasting priesthood throughout all generations' (Ex. 40:15). However it was only perpetual because of a succession of priests was provided to fulfil the ministry (23). The superiority of Christ's priesthood is seen in the fact that he, uniquely, continues for ever (24). He remains the same (cf. 1:8-12, 13:8) - a permanent priest. 'The essential likeness to the priesthood of Melchizedek proclaimed in v1-10 and the essential contrast with the priesthood of the Levites asserted in 23-25' (Peterson).

iii. It works.

The implications of all the teaching about Jesus as a priest in the order of Melchizedek are seen in v25ff. His eternal priesthood means that he is able to 'save completely those who come to God through him'.

The idea of 'coming' to God, 'approaching' and 'drawing near' is important in Hebrews (cf. 4:16, 7:19, 10:1,22,, 11:6, 12:18,22). It expresses fundamentally the idea of relationship with God. The Levitical system made only imperfect provision for this but Christ, as priest, has not only provided the 'once-for-all' sacrifice for sin (27) but is at the right hand of God willing and able to apply the benefits of that sacrifice on behalf of His people.

iv Christ is holy, blameless and pure.

In contrast to other priests (28) Jesus was sinless (26). Thus his sacrifice was perfect and needed no repetition (27). Indeed he offered himself (27). This is a new thought in the letter, explaining exactly how he made purification / atonement (1:3, 2:17) and will be developed later (cf. ch 8-10).

v. Christ is exalted

His heavenly exaltation means that he is always in God's presence and, as a priest lives to apply the benefits of his saving work to his people (25).

IMPLICATIONS

- Jesus' priesthood is genuine but very different to that established by the law.
- The fact that he is now the exalted and eternal high priest means that he is now, and will always be, available to apply the benefits of his once for all sacrifice on behalf of his people.
- He was qualified ('perfected' 2:10, 5:8-10) to be a saviour of God's people by persevering through suffering in obedience to the God's will (2:18, 4:15), and he now lives as the exalted high priest to qualify ('perfect') his people for heaven (7:18-19). Understanding this should result in a growing confidence in God's ability to keep us going as Christians.

Hebrews 8:1-13

AIM

To understand how the new covenant differs from the Mosaic covenant, why it was needed and the significance within it of Jesus' high priestly role.

CONTEXT

- The theme of Jesus as our great high priest has dominated the letter since 4:14. The writer has established both the genuineness of his high priesthood and its superiority to the levitical one (5:1-6, 7:1-25). He has shown that the key to this superiority is Christ's ability to bring 'perfection' to the people of God - to qualify them for, bring them into and sustain them in God's presence (7:25). This was something that the levitical priests (and the law) was unable to do (7:11, 18).
- In ch 8 and 9 our writer will demonstrate *how* Jesus' priestly ministry makes it possible for us to come into relationship with him. Central to this is God's promise of a 'new covenant' in Jer 31:31-34 that Christ has now established (cf. 8:8-12 & 10:15-18).
- Although there is a *future*, as yet unfulfilled, aspect of a believer's relationship to God (2:10, 4:11; cf. 12:14, 12:22) the writer's emphasis has been on the *present* reality of that relationship, of the believer's 'drawing near to God' (7:19, cf. 4:16, 10:22). Christ's priestly ministry enables access to, and a relationship with, God *now*, one that was not possible through the former covenant. The nature of that relationship is alluded to in 8:10-11 and developed in later chapters.

A SUPERIOR MINISTER

The crux of the argument is that Jesus' high priestly work is in a different league to his predecessors. He is eternal (7:16-17, 24), not ephemeral (7:23) and his sacrifice is a one off eternally effective one, not a repetitive of only temporary value (7:27). The writer now goes on to develop the contrast between Christ's and the levitical priesthood.

- i. The levitical ministry was carried out in first a tabernacle and then the temple. Although Moses had been commanded by God to build the tent and had been given a pattern to follow (8:5. cf. Ex. 25:40) it was 'man-made' (cf. 9:24) and part of the earthly created order. As such it was merely a 'copy or shadow' - a shadowy outline; an inferior, second-hand, pale imitation - of that to which it was to point.

In contrast Christ's served at the real sanctuary, built not by man but by God, that is not part of this created order (8:1-2, cf. 9:11). After his exaltation Jesus entered heaven as both king (8:1 cf. 1:3) and priest (7:24-25). As priest he appears for us in God's presence (9:24, cf. 7:25). His work in the heavenlies (cf. 9:11ff) is the reality of which the OT institutions were only a foreshadowing (cf. 10:1).

This difference is the writer's main point in 8:1-6. It shows clearly how much greater Jesus' ministry is than that of the OT priests. This contrast, and its implications, are developed further in 9:1-12.

Other differences that the writer mentions and that will be developed later are:

- ii. Jesus sits down (8:1 cf. 1:3, 13). This shows that Jesus one sacrifice is effective. No others are needed so he sits down, the job complete. This will be developed further in 9:25-10:18.
- iii. The sacrifice offered is different. This is implied in 8:3-4 and elaborated on in 9:12-15 and 9:25-10:10.

OF A SUPERIOR COVENANT

Our writer has already established the link between priesthood and law/covenant. Priests are inextricably linked to the covenants that they mediate (7:11-12, 8:6). Now, having established that Jesus' priesthood is in a different league to any other previously seen (7:1-8:5) he now goes on to show that the covenant of which he is the priest/mediator is similarly in a different league to that which had gone before (8:6).

- Something had been wrong with the first covenant made at Sinai (8:7). The fault lay with the people (8:8). They had proved themselves faithless and judgement and exile had followed (8:9).
- Amazingly God's response, through the prophet Jeremiah (8:8-12, cf. Jer 31:31-34) was to promise a further covenant with Israel that would be better than that which they had had before. He will re-establish his special relationship with them - 'I will be their God and they will be my people' (8:10). However now things will be better since the new covenant is based on 'better promises' (8:6).
- The means to the fulfilment of these better promises was God's commitment to forgive Israel's rebellion and sin. (Note the 'for'

at the beginning of 8:12). In other words the new covenant is better because in it God undertakes to deal with the problem of the peoples sin himself.

DIBS (DIFFICULT AND INTERESTING BITS!)

Although the thrust of these verses are clear they raise a number of important issues, some of which will be developed later.

1. What do these better promises (8:10-11) mean?

8:10

What does it mean when God says to his people "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts"? Our writer will have more to say on this later. However it is worth noting here that:

- Heart in Hebrews is the place of rational functions, planning and volition (3:8,10,12, 15; 4:7,12).
- The inverted parallelism in 8:10 and 10:16 suggests that to our writer 'hearts' and 'minds' are synonymous.
- The believer can draw near to God 'with a *true heart* in full assurance of faith' with '*hearts sprinkled clean* from an evil conscience' - that is 'set free from the burden of unforgiven sins and thus renewed in faith and sincerity towards God' (Peterson). Such cleansing is made possible only by blood of Christ (9:10, 13-14).

8:11

Clearly the new covenant involves a new knowledge of God. Each member of the new covenant community will know him directly and personally (8:11). But what does this mean?

Our writer will argue that this promise is fulfilled in the individuals, direct and confident approach to God that Jesus makes possible and it is this that he calls his readers to (4:16, 7:25, 10:19-22, cf. 12:22-24).

2. The place of the Mosaic Law

The writer had clearly linked covenant and priest (7:16, 8:6). Different priesthoods mediate different covenants and are associated with different 'laws' (7:11-12, 8:4). The question might be asked then - 'To what extent is the law of the new covenant (8:10) reflect that of the old (7:11)?' Are they synonymous? If the 'old' covenant is obsolete (8:13) to what extent does the Mosaic law constrain the people of the new covenant? On what basis does one hold to one aspect of it whilst rejecting another? Can the 'law' of the new covenant be determined and if so how? In summary, how should Christians view the Mosaic law? (These questions are currently stimulating much debate amongst evangelical scholars. See, for example, 'Five views on Law and Gospel' W. Strickland, Zondervan).

3. Although nothing about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the new covenant community is mentioned in Jer 31:31-34 (cf. Gal. 3-4, Rom 9-11) Hebrews makes it clear that anyone who has confidence in Jesus and what he achieved will share in the fulfilment of God's promises to his ancient people (cf. 3:14, 4:3, 5:9, 7:25).

IMPLICATIONS

The application of this teaching about Christ's superior ministry mediating a superior covenant are primarily negative ones at this point of the argument (The positive ones will come later on (cf. eg. 10:19ff). They have to do with the inadequacy and obsolete nature of the Mosaic covenant (8:7, 13). Our understanding of this passage will have implications for how we view the constraints of the Mosaic covenant (see point 2 under DIBS above). In your discussions together remember Rom 14:1-15:13!

The notes on chapter 9 seem to have disappeared. Sorry!

Hebrews 10:1-18

AIM

To understand the Jesus' work brings perfection and that all of God's revelation points to this.

CONTEXT

- In some respects the first half of the chapter is a summary of the section of the book which began at 4:14. These middle chapters of Hebrews are chiefly concerned with explaining the work Jesus has done. He is the superior High Priest (eternal priest king - chapters 5-7) of a superior covenant (chapter 8) who ministers in a superior tabernacle (chapter 9) whose sacrifice works, bringing forgiveness (chapters 9-10).
- These verses draw to a conclusion many ideas that have been under discussion in this central section of the letter.
 - i. The old system being a shadow of the real work of Christ (8:5-6; 9:11, 24)
 - ii. The old system being there to reveal our need for forgiveness (8:7-9; 9:8-9)
 - iii. The old system being inadequate to make us perfect (7:11,18; 8:6-7)
 - iv. Jesus establishing a new covenant which is effective (7:22, 8:6,13; 9:15)
- These verses also describe the obedience of Christ which was focuses on at the beginning of the letter; not just his obedience at the point of his death on a cross but his obedience in the whole of his incarnation - his life of suffering, temptation and his death (2:10,17-18; 5:8).
- Finally we are reminded that Jesus is now sitting at the Father's right hand waiting for his enemies to be made a footstool - a major theme of the book (1:3,13; 2:7-8, 8:1).

As many of the ideas in this section have been seen before in the letter it is important to consider what this summary section adds. The writer is emphasising that God's entire self-revelation points to the work of Christ establishing a new covenant. It is therefore with this authority that we can have confidence to enter God's presence (10:19).

STRUCTURE

10:1-4 The testimony of the old covenant

10:5-14 The testimony of Christ

10:15-18 The testimony of the Holy Spirit

THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD COVENANT (10:1-4)

The writer describes the law of Moses as only a shadow of the good things that are coming. By this he means that it foreshadows the blessings of the new covenant that Jesus would bring. The role of the ritual law was to point to the need for the ultimate realities that Jesus would bring (10:3). This is the testimony of the old covenant, that we need cleansing from our sins.

The perfecting of believers has to do with cleansing their consciences from the guilt of sin (9:9,14; 10:2). The NIV translation 'felt guilty for their sins' means that because of the way the old system functioned worshippers had knowledge of their sin as it was impossible to be cleansed from it.

THE TESTIMONY OF CHRIST (10:15-18)

Christ becomes man in his incarnation and makes a declaration about himself (10:5-7). His use of the psalm shows that all OT revelation has been about Jesus. These words are attributed to Christ because they find absolute fulfilment in his life. He declares that he is the one who pleases God.

In the body (10:5,10) that was prepared for the Son, he lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father culminating in his death as an unblemished sacrifice (9:14). It was God's will to make us holy in this way. He came to set aside the ancient sacrificial system and bring about the obedience to God that the rituals always looked for. His cleansing makes possible a definitive consecration of believers to God (10:16; cf. Jer 31:33).

The writer reminds us that the priest of the new covenant is also the priest king, once again echoing Ps 110:1. He has, by this one sacrifice, fully pleased God making his people perfect forever ie. forgiven (10:18). Jesus declares he is the one who provides the perfect sacrifice.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE SPIRIT (10:15-18)

The Spirit who inspired the prophets in the first place continues to speak through their writings to believers in every generation (3:7). Through the prophecy of Jer 31:33-34 (quoted here in an abbreviated form), the Holy Spirit specifically testifies to us about the things mentioned in the preceding verses. The prophecy points to a promise of decisive forgiveness of sins when there would hence be no longer any sacrifice for sin. But closely attached to this is the promise of renewed hearts and minds, helping to define the perfection and sanctification about which the writer has been speaking (10:10,14).

The repeat of the quotation from Jeremiah (cf. 8:7-12) signals that the argument begun in 8 has come to an end. The Holy Spirit himself declares that Christ has achieved the necessary forgiveness.

DIBS

Of that which the law foreshadowed (10:1) what do we enjoy now and what is yet to come (9:28)?

All that need be done to establish the new covenant has been done. Christ has died, ascended and now sits in heaven at God's right hand interceding on behalf of his people. Our sins are forgiven (10:17). This is a present reality and the basis for the confidence we can have in approaching God. That this should be our confidence lies close to the heart of what our writer wants to say (14:14ff, 10:18ff).

However God promises

- i. To write his laws on our hearts (8:10) / minds (10:16).

Elsewhere the NT asserts that God has begun his work in our hearts / in our minds. However in context Jeremiah's prophecy is about being *sinless* in contrast to Israel under the old covenant. Hence this aspect of the prophecy is still largely unfulfilled and will remain so until Jesus returns (cf. 9:28).

- ii. That all will know God such that none of us will need to be taught (8:11).

There are now no barriers between God and the Christian. Direct access to God is *the* great Christian privilege that our writer is most keen to emphasise. No intermediary is needed. There is no hierarchy. Sin has been dealt with. Everyone has equal access to God. Hence in this most important sense all believers know God.

However this knowledge doesn't mean that at present there is no need for teachers. The letter itself is testimony to the fact that Christians need to be taught, and growth in knowledge and understanding is one of the writers antidotes to risk of apostasy (cf. 5:11ff). Thus this part of the prophecy is still unfulfilled.

IMPLICATIONS

The old covenant is obsolete. A new covenant that brings forgiveness has been established. Much of the rest of the book will be concerned with drawing out the implications of this (eg. cf. 10:19ff).

At this point, however, it might be worth reflecting on our understanding of what Christ has done:

- How would I describe Christ's work on my behalf? How has my understanding developed / been refined by studying Hebrews so far?
- On what do I rely in my life? What do I plead before God? To what extent does this reflect an impoverished understanding of Christ's work?

Hebrews 12:1-12

AIM

- To understand how both Christ's example and the witness of scripture provide encouragement for us to keep going as

Christians.

- To reflect on what we must do for ourselves and for each other to help us to persevere.

CONTEXT

The writer has argued for the need for persevering faith (10:35-39) and described its character (11:1-40). This is against a backdrop of repeated warnings to those who had seemingly started well in the Christian life but were now in danger of shrinking back (2:1-5, 3:7-4:12, 5:11-6:12, 10:26-31). He now adds further encouragements that they might persevere.

ARGUMENT

Christians are called to endure a contest and to do everything necessary to see that they keep going to the end. The metaphor employed by the writer is that of a race (12:1) - a marathon rather than a sprint - along a path from which there is danger of wandering (12:13, cf. Prov 4: 26-27). The writer offers three encouragements to help them persevere:

12:1 The cloud of witnesses (the 'ancients' of ch 11:1ff)

12:2-4 The work and example of Christ

12:5-11 The nature and purpose of discipline.

The witness of scripture (12:1, 5-11) and the example of Christ (12:2-4) should be reflected upon (12:1, 12:2-3, 12:5). This result should be both individual (12:1) and a corporate (12:12-13) response so that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the Christian's 'race' to heaven.

THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES (12:1)

The writer now applies the teaching of ch 11. The first encouragement to press on in faith and obedience is 'being surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses'. The ancients have received witness (or acknowledgement) from God because of their faith (cf. 11:2, 4, 5, 39) and thus stand in scripture as a witness to the nature and possibilities of faith.

The imagery here is not so much of the ancients being spectators whilst his readers run the race. Rather it is the approval of their actions and experiences received whilst *they* ran that is the 'witness' to future generations. (Once again the writer asserts that scripture speaks with a living voice to believers of every age - cf. 3:7ff, 4:12f, 10:36ff).

THE AUTHOR AND PERFECTER OF FAITH (12:2-4)

The second encouragement to persevere in faith comes from contemplating the work and example of Christ. (The use of the name Jesus suggests the focus is on his experience as a man (cf. 2:9, 3:1, 5:7f)).

Author of faith: As in 2:10 the idea is of a 'leader', 'pathfinder' and 'pioneer' who has gone ahead of his people. Salvation for his people was won by his treading the path of obedience and enduring the hardship that ensued (cf. 2:10, 5:7-9). Both he and the Hebrews are of the same family (2:11) and there is a need for those would benefit from his work to follow in his footsteps, at least in some measure (12:3-4, cf. 5:9: 'he became the source of eternal salvation for *all who obey him*')

Perfecter of faith: Jesus' life on earth is the perfect example of faith. Looking to the future and the joy that awaited (12:2) he persevered in obedience through suffering and shame (12:3, cf. 5:7-9) to enter into glory (12:2).

Our writer wants his readers to reflect on these things so that they don't 'lose heart and grow faint' (12:3 NEB). He wants them to compare Jesus' 'race' to the one that they were in, with particular emphasis on his attitude under suffering and when facing disgrace.

'Jesus humiliated offers Christians the supreme example of endurance whenever they experience humiliation. *Jesus vindicated and enthroned* provides certainty that Christians will also be vindicated when they demonstrate the necessary endurance which validates the life of committed faithfulness' (Lane)

Note:

- In 12:4 the writer is not *blaming* them for their failure to resist to the point of bloodshed, but *shaming* them: their sufferings are much less than Jesus had to bear and yet they are apparently ready to give up.
- The 'sin' in 12:4 is synonymous with 'sinful men' in 12:3. Thus its use is different to that in 12:1 where sin itself is in view - that power that would seek to engender unbelief / disobedience.

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE

(5-11)

The quotation from proverbs (15:5-6) might seem out of place until it is realised that the hostility and suffering a Christian faces as a result of identification with Christ is to be understood as discipline (12:7). The hardship and sufferings in view in these chapters are particularly those faced when previous tolerance turns to public hostility.

The biblical concept of discipline carries with it the ideas of training, instruction and firm guidance as well as reproof, correction and punishment. The emphasis here is on the former (12:11). Adversity and hardship consequent upon faithfulness to Christ are to be recognised as the means designated by God to call his people of faithful and obedient sonship (12:9), to mature them now and fit them for heaven (12:9,11).

Viewed from the right perspective the hardships they had faced (10:32-34), and would continue to face (13: 13), are cause for encouragement since they are a:

i. Mark of their true sonship v5-8

The filial relationship between God and his people is confirmed by His treating them as sons, an integral part of which is (instructive) discipline. It is the universal experience of God's people to face opposition (12:8) and this disciplining is a mark of their sonship.

ii. Means of maturing them v9-11

All sons have experienced discipline / instruction from their fathers, for a while, as they thought best. However God lovingly and consistently, disciplines his people throughout their lives for their good that they might grow in maturity.

Our writer needs to remind his readers that the hardship and sufferings that they faced were God's means of training them, both for this world and the next (12:9, 11). Far from being a cause for discouragement they should stimulate confidence since they attest to the family relationship between them and their God.

THE RESPONSE OF FAITH (12-13)

The writer applies his teaching at two points in the passage:

v2 an injunction for his readers to have done with anything that hinders them in the 'race'. He has no particular 'sin' in mind. His concern is rather that they free themselves from anything - however neutral or even 'good' in themselves - that drags them down and impedes their 'race'.

v12-13 The result of these reflections on the ancients, Jesus' example and on the purpose of hardship is to resolve to keep going. The allusion here is to Is 35:3-4 and Pr 4:26-27. They must keep going straight ahead, staying on the right path (12:13, cf. 2:1, Pr 4:27) and encourage each other to do so, that those who are faltering will finish the race.

IMPLICATIONS

What has been the greatest threat to my persevering / growing to maturity in the last year? How did I / have I responded?

What should have been my response according to these verses? Why would it have helped?

Hebrews 13

AIM

To understand what it will involve to be committed to Jesus, to the gospel and to God's people.

CONTEXT

This final chapter appears at first glance to be substantially different from the previous chapters. However it is an integral part of the writer's argument. It develops directly from 12:28-29. We are called to be thankful and to worship God acceptably. This chapter explains what this worship involves. In developing this theme it raises new injunctions for us to follow - but it also links back strongly to the argument of the whole book.

STRUCTURE

- 1-6 Be committed to God's people whatever the cost.
- 7-17 Be committed to the gospel of Jesus whatever the cost
- 15-17 Summary of acceptable worship
- 18-25 Concluding prayers

COMMITTED TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD (v1-6)

This section describes in practical terms what it will mean to be committed to God's people. Chapter 12 has described the great gathering of the people of God (12:12,23) of which we are a part (12:28). The writer has shown throughout the book that Jesus has come to build a people, His church, His family (2:10-13, 3:6, 11:40) and that we have a corporate responsibility for one another (3:13, 10:24-25, 12:13-14). Here the writer is explicit. We are now family and must love one another. This will have many implications:

- We must be prepared to suffer with God's people and align ourselves with those who are suffering (v2-3). In v2 the writer is reminding his readers of Abraham and Lot (Gen 18, 19) who welcomed God's servants amidst a world that was against Him. Lot in particular rescued two angels when faced with evil and aggression (Gen 19:1-5) In the same way we too are to support God's servants whatever the cost. We are to care for our fellow believers in their trials of persecution as though we ourselves were suffering too.
- In calling the congregation to love one another the writer is careful to remind his readers to respect the institute of marriage. Loving one another as brothers will mean respecting the bounds of marriage. It is vital that the church is sexually pure. Adultery is phenomenally destructive to relationships - and not just to those immediately involved. It can wreck the unity of a congregation. Marriage is to be honoured as it is a picture of Jesus' relationship with the church, of his love and commitment.
- We as God's people are to be living for a future hope and not caught up in the treasures of this world (v5-6, cf. 11:26, 12:2-3, 10:34, 10:36, 13:14). Moses had to give up the treasures of Egypt to align himself with God's people. We too may have to forfeit things, or share them with those in need (13:16). Indeed many of the writers original readers had already lost much. He reminds them of God's great promise given to Israel just before they entered the promised land (cf. Deut 31:6). He concludes this section with a psalm which exalts in the confidence that God is victorious despite the opposition faced by his people (Ps 118:5-14) and by His Servant (Ps 118:22). The psalm ends with a joyful procession of God's people entering His presence (Ps 118:27). The writers use of this psalm reminds us that we are part of the family of God come into the presence of God to give Him thanks. This 'drawing close' is one of the great themes of Hebrews (cf. 2:10-13, 12:22-23, 12:28).

COMMITTED TO THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST (v7-14)

In v7 the readers are reminded to stick with the gospel. Their leaders spoke the word of God. The message that they spoke is summed up in the v8. This is the message about Jesus that has been the chief concern of our writer. Jesus is the great High Priest who is *now* seated with God. It was God's plan to rescue people through His Son and Jesus' work is now finished forever (1:1-4; 10:1, 7, 10, 12). This is the message that the writer has urged them to continue with (2:1-3; 3:6, 3:12-14; 10:23, 25; 12:12, 25).

In 12:9-14 the writer summarises why the readers should stick with the gospel about Jesus and urges them to avoid the syncretism that sticking with Jewish rituals would mean. His rationale is that:

- i. It is God's grace that strengthens His people, not ritual food (v9)
- ii. We have direct access into the very presence of God (v10)
- iii. Jesus bore great disgrace in being crucified outside the city walls. As his brothers we must be prepared to align ourselves with Him in that disgrace, for our home is not here on earth but in the world to come.

BE THANKFUL & WORSHIP GOD ACCEPTABLY (v15-17)

The verses summarise the writers practical injunctions:

STICK WITH JESUS v15

Be thankful (12:28); Be publicly aligned to Jesus (13:13); Confess His name. The phrase 'sacrifice of praise' implies that to live like this may mean suffering now cf. 12:3).

STICK WITH HIS PEOPLE V16

Our worship (or service - the same word in the Greek) is intensely practical. It involves loving God's people and sharing with them even in times of persecution. *This* is the worship that pleases God.

Obeys the word that the leaders speak. The message which they have taught is the message from which we must not drift.

AND FINALLY ...

The writer finishes with some personal remarks. His final prayer for his readers incorporates many of the major themes of the letter:

- The peace of God - won for us by Christ in the establishment of the new covenant (8:8-13)
- The blood of the eternal covenant - the new covenant is effective because of Jesus' sacrifice (9:14, 10:9-14).
- Jesus has been brought back from the dead - Jesus has conquered death and is alive at God's right hand (1:3, 2:9, 7:24-25).
- The great Shepherd of the Sheep - the great leader who has pioneered salvation for his people (2:10, 5:9, 12:2).

It is to God who has done these great things for His people that the writer prays. He is concerned that his readers are equipped to do God's will which is to be committed to the gospel and God's people. He is concerned that he is pleasing to God too. Within this prayer is the acknowledgement that we need God to equip us. We will fail on our own.

IMPLICATIONS

There are many outworkings of this chapter to consider. They broadly fall into three categories. It may be useful to use them to pray through the implications of the teaching of the book of Hebrews over the next two weeks.

Am I committed to God's people?

How do I express love for my brothers and sisters?
How do I support those who are suffering for their faithfulness to Christ?
What is my attitude to our meetings together?
What more could I do?

What is my attitude to marriage? How do I relate to married believers? What is my attitude (if applicable) to my own marriage?
In what ways should my behaviour change?

What is my attitude to my possessions? Am I content? How can I share more?

Am I committed to God's word?

What leads me to drift from the gospel message?
How do I view my leaders who teach me the gospel?
Are there teachings that tempt me away from the gospel?
Do I believe that Jesus is forever the same - in the terms expressed by the writer to the Hebrews?
Is this the gospel I own and proclaim?

Am I committed to Jesus?

Am I prepared to publicly confess Jesus?
Do I confess my relationship to Jesus in situations when I may be mocked or despised?
Am I truly thankful to God for all He has done?
Do I believe that through Jesus I have direct access to God *now*?
In what way does my life reflect that Jesus has secured my access into God's presence?