

HEBREWS

Quiet Time Series, Oct–Nov 2011

Introduction to the Series

We have prepared this series on the book of Hebrews in the hope that it will encourage you in your faith in God and his Son, Jesus. For each section of scripture, we provide some notes and/or questions to help you get started, followed by some more detailed points for delving deeper into the text when you have time. We have prepared studies for each week day, leaving weekends free for other study or catching up. We welcome comments, criticisms and questions (send to EastTeachingMinistry@gmail.com).

In this section we provide some background material that you might find helpful.

Authorship

It is uncertain who wrote Hebrews. Many modern scholars and early Christian writers have made claims for likely candidates, although for the most part the guesses are based on conjecture rather than evidence. Some of the popular choices include Paul, Clement of Rome, Luke, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos and Barnabas.

Amongst early Christian writers there was a difference of opinion as to the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. Origen (185-255AD) from Alexandria had doubts about the author although he did admit that the thoughts of Hebrews could be Paul's, but its style wasn't. He was therefore happy to conclude that "God alone knows the author". Many modern scholars have agreed with Origen when comparing Hebrews to other Pauline epistles in the NT canon. The first argument for rejecting Pauline authorship is anonymity in Hebrews; Paul usually identifies himself in the prologue of his epistles. The second argument for rejection is that unlike Paul who received the gospel/revelation directly from Jesus and not man (Gal 1:11-12), the Hebrew writer includes himself with the audience of second generation Christians who heard the gospel from those who heard Jesus directly (Heb 2:3).

Many had proposed Clement of Rome (50-100AD) since his first letter (1 Clement) written to the church in Corinth (95AD) borrows from Hebrews. However 1 Clement and Hebrews differ widely in theological content. Barnabas has been a candidate solely on the basis of his Levitical and Hellenistic background being a Cypriot. Luke has also been considered for his quality Greek literary style which is a close match for Hebrews, but as a Gentile he might not share the same thorough knowledge of the OT especially the Levitical details of Judaism. Apollos, the Alexandrian Jew with a thorough knowledge of the OT scriptures (Acts 18), has been a popular option amongst some modern scholars. The Hebrew writer most likely was a Hellenistic Jew with an extensive use of citations from the OT Septuagint (LXX). Apollos certainly matched this criteria although there is no internal or external evidence proving this.

Date

As with authorship there is a spectrum of opinion with most scholars dating the epistle from the early sixties to no later than 95AD. Those who propose a date after 70AD disregard internal evidence/allusions within Hebrews:

- The tabernacle/temple designs and sacrificial systems are described in present tense
- There is a strange silence about the destruction of the temple with its sacrifices had Hebrews been written post 70AD

Based on the internal evidence above it would be reasonable to propose a date in the late 60s (68/69AD). An earlier date is unlikely due to the silence about Paul, when the writer does mention Timothy, Paul's son in the faith, who was recently released from prison. No other NT letter documents such an event in the lifetime of Paul, who was still alive (imprisoned in Rome) in 67AD, when he wrote 2 Timothy, urging Timothy to meet him in Rome.

Audience

Most would agree that the readers are mostly Christian Jews, whether Greek speaking or Hebrew speaking; it would be hard to differentiate from the letter. Some have thought that based on the citations from the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), Hellenistic Jews living outside Palestine were the likely readers. A few have suggested the readers to be the Qumran community due to their

high respect for angels, leaving the writer the opportunity to stress the superiority of Christ over angels; however many other Jewish groups including Jewish priests who came faith had regard for angels. Some have even suggested that Gentile readers were likely since Gentile Christians would have been reasonably familiar with the Greek OT, but the readers were qualified to be teachers in the faith (Heb 5:12) and were very familiar with the Jewish sacrificial system and the temple, which fits better to readers with a Jewish heritage.

Destination

One suggested location of the audience is Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish culture. The problem with this is that most Jews in that area would have been Hebrew speaking and not Greek speaking, so they would have used Hebrew OT reference rather than the Septuagint. The second problem is Heb 2:3 that the audience and the writer were not eyewitnesses. A popular alternative suggestion is that the audience was in Rome, since the writer sends greetings from Italian natives who not in Italy at present (Heb 13:24).

Background and Theological Themes

The readers were finding Christianity less attractive to sustain in the height of increasing persecution and alienation from the Jewish people. Many Jewish Christians rationalised that it would be easier to revert back to Judaism and the Law, which was legally accepted by the Roman government. The writer was using the OT scriptures to show the superiority of Christ and his better covenant, better priesthood, and better sacrifice than those of Mosiac old covenant. Christ is shown to be superior to angels, Moses, Joshua as well as the Aaronic priesthood. To turn away from Christ and revert to Judaism would be like not heeding the voice of God, hardening their hearts and returning to Egypt instead of pursuing the promised land – Gods rest.

Heb 1:1-4

Mon 3 Oct

Hebrews starts by introducing God and how he communicates with people: first it was through the prophets and finally through Jesus.

What are some of the ways that God spoke to people through prophets? What would we know about God if he had never spoken to us through his prophets or through his Son? Are we grateful for the revelation we have of God, particularly in the Bible?

This section introduces some themes that are explained in detail later in Hebrews (don't give up - it will all become clear in the next few weeks!). What do verses 2-4 tell us about Jesus? I found 9 different things - some are easy to understand, like "Jesus is superior to angels", but others, like "Jesus is the radiance of God's glory", are a bit harder to get a grip on. Spend some time thinking about what each of the phrases mean. For example, it says Jesus "sustains all things". In other words, he keeps the universe running. So is he able to help you when you are in need?

Further Notes

The greatest events in world history were Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. These events divide history into two parts, the "before" and "after". The expression "last days" (v2) just refers to the "after" part of history — it isn't there to suggest that the world might end tomorrow.

Everything that God revealed through the prophets was pointing towards Jesus. He is the fulfilment of God's promises, and also the fulfilment of the roles of people who represented God in the Old Testament - the king, priest, prophet and wise man. Hebrews uses the Old Testament references to each of these roles and shows how they point to Jesus:

A) King: When Jesus finished his work on earth and ascended into heaven, he "sat down at the right hand of the majesty". We use "His/Her Majesty" to refer to a king or queen, and here the picture is God sitting on his throne, and his Son (v5), the heir (v2), being seated on his throne at God's right hand, from where he rules the world (v3, "sustaining all things").

B) Priest: By his sacrificial death for us, Jesus “provided purification for sins”. In the Old Testament, it was the priest’s job to purify the people by sacrificing animals to God. (We will learn much more about this in Heb 4-10.)

C) Prophet: Jesus’ revelation is compared with that of the prophets in v1-2. The first chapters of Hebrews demonstrate that what Jesus revealed is better.

D) Wisdom: In Prov 8:22-36, God’s wisdom is personified and credited with being active in creating and sustaining the world, as well as in God’s revelation and his reconciliation of man to God. This theme was very popular in Jewish literature around the time Jesus was on earth. By crediting Jesus with creating (v2) and sustaining (v3) the world, Hebrews links this tradition with Jesus, using language that would have been very familiar to the original readers of Hebrews. (If you have the Apocrypha, compare this passage with Wisdom 7:22-27.)

Verse 4 states that Jesus inherited a superior name - this is explained in v5 as “my Son” (see also Php 2:9; Eph 1:21).

The sudden mention of angels might seem surprising, but the topic is God’s revelation, and angels are often involved in revelation: Heb 2:2; Ex 3:2; Is 63:9; Ac 7:38,53; Gal 3:19.

Heb 1:5-14

Tue 4 Oct

This passage is mostly quotes from the Old Testament illustrating how much greater than angels Jesus is. We will come to many more Old Testament quotes in Hebrews. At first, the Old Testament verses might seem obscure, but if you look carefully at the explanations of how these passages point to Jesus, it will help to open your mind to understand the Old Testament (Luke 24:27,32,44-45).

Many Old Testament passages have a double meaning: the first meaning is the literal one, for example a passage about King David or Solomon. But God’s promises (such as David’s kingdom lasting forever: 2 Sam 7:12-16; Ps 89:27-29) are not fulfilled in this first sense. The deeper meaning of the Old Testament is fulfilled only by Jesus. So the kingdom of God, established by Jesus (a descendent of David), does in fact last forever (Lk 1:32-33). Hebrews presents a Christian understanding of several such Old Testament themes (e.g. the promised land, priests, sacrifice). Now back to the text.

Verse 5 quotes Psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14, both of which on the surface speak about the king of Israel as God’s son. But there is no doubt that Jesus has a special position as Son of God, as God himself announced with a voice from heaven (Mark 1:11). This is the “superior name” that Jesus has (Heb 1:4).

In verse 6, Jesus is worshipped by angels. This immediately sets him apart from the angels, who are not to be worshipped (Rev 22:8-9). In fact the angels serve God (verse 7, quoting Ps 104:4) and are unstable like the weather, while Jesus rules over his kingdom forever (verse 8-9, quoting Ps 45:6-7). Verses 10-12 (Ps 102:25-27) address Jesus as the creator (see verse 2) who will outlast his creation. You can depend on Jesus. He doesn’t change (Heb 13:8).

The final quote, in verse 13, is from Ps 110:1, where Jesus is invited to take up his place on the throne at God’s right hand, sharing God’s glory. In comparison, angels are only servants and they do not share God’s glory.

How is all this talk about angels and thrones relevant to us in the 21st century? The angels were the messengers who gave God’s law to Israel (Ex 3:2; Acts 7:38,53; Gal 3:19), but Jesus came with a better message, to save us from living under the curse of the law (Gal 3:10). Are you encouraged by thinking about Jesus’ greatness? Does it boost your confidence to know the king who is enthroned forever at God’s right hand? Do you spend you time and energy on things that are permanent or things that perish and wear out (verse 11, see also Heb 10:34; 12:27; 13:14)?

Further Notes

Although it might surprise us, it was normal in the first century for Jews to understand passages like the ones quoted here in Hebrews as referring to the Messiah (see for example Jn 7:42).

There is some debate over the meaning of the word “today” in the first quote. Considering the context of the passage in Hebrews, it probably corresponds to Jesus’ ascension into heaven after his

resurrection, rather than when he was born on earth. So “firstborn” (v6) is used as in Col 1:18 “firstborn from among the dead”; and “into the world” (v6) is referring to the spiritual world, i.e. heaven (see Heb 2:5 “the world to come, about which we are speaking”, which clearly refers back to Heb 1:6).

Verse 6 quotes from Deut 32:43 (see the footnote in NIV - the phrase is missing from many manuscripts, but appears in the Greek translation and the Qumran scrolls). This is the end of the song that Moses taught the Israelites so that they wouldn't forget what God had done for them, and it ends with the promise that God will make atonement for his people, which was fulfilled by Jesus' death.

The quote from Ps 45:6-7 in verses 8-9 is quite jarring in its original context: the king of Israel is addressed as God! I don't know what a Jew would make of such a statement; its fulfilment in Jesus is the only answer.

Verses 10-12 (Ps 102:25-27) do not refer to Jesus directly, but the link has already been established in verse 2, that Jesus is the mediator and sustainer of creation, so these verses can be applied to him. Jesus is king forever, and we will see later in Hebrews that his priesthood also lasts forever.

Jesus' enthronement (v13) is mentioned several times in Hebrews (e.g. 1:3), as well as in Jesus' teaching (Mk 12:35-37; Mk 14:62 - where it was considered blasphemy), Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:34-35), and Paul's letters (1 Cor 15:25).

Heb 2:1-4

Wed 5 Oct

This is the first of several warnings that are given in Hebrews, and it follows directly from the teaching about how great Jesus is in chapter 1. The danger is that we might drift away from God. Think for a moment about what this means. Drifting is not a conscious decision that we make. It is what happens when you do nothing, when you “let go” and “go with the flow”. It is the easiest thing to do. How do you know if you are drifting?

You might be tempted to think that under the Old Covenant, God was tough and you had to be very careful about your life, but now we are under God's grace and we can relax. The first part is true (see verse 2 and Num 15:30), but the final conclusion is entirely wrong; the author of Hebrews draws the opposite conclusion about our situation. The gospel requires serious attention, and we should be even more careful (v1) with it because it is a more valuable message (“a great salvation”, v3), just as you would be more careful with £1000 in your pocket than if you only had 5p. We have much greater privileges under the New Covenant, which result in greater accountability (Lk 12:47-48).

In order to dispel any doubts about the gospel, God authenticated his message with miracles and spiritual gifts, according to his will. We have the record of Jesus' and the apostles' teaching and wonders, written by eyewitnesses, in the Bible. We are warned about neglecting or ignoring what God has done for us and what he says to us. How do you think you should respond to this warning?

Further Notes

Verse 2 refers to a message that was “spoken by angels”. From the context it is clear that this is the Law of Moses. Although very little is said about angels in the Old Testament account of Moses (e.g. Ex 3:2), several other New Testament verses refer to the role of angels (Acts 7:38,53; Gal 3:19).

An interesting point to note from verse 3 is that the author of Hebrews was not an apostle, and certainly not the apostle Paul (cf Gal 1:12). Likewise, the recipients of the letter were “second generation” Christians. At this time, it appears that miracles were still taking place (Heb 6:4-5), and “signs and wonders” (v4) were sufficiently common knowledge that they could be cited as evidence of the certainty of the gospel. “Gifts of the Holy Spirit” (v4) could mean either that the Holy Spirit was giving gifts (as in 1 Cor 12:11) or that God was giving the Holy Spirit as a gift (as in Gal 3:5).

Heb 2:5-9

Thu 6 Oct

This passage resumes the comparison of Jesus with angels from chapter 1, after a brief interlude for the warning in Heb 2:1-4. Verses 5 and 8 clarify that the subduing of Jesus' enemies (mentioned in 1:13) has not yet taken place, but will take place in the future, in "the world to come". We will see this theme of looking to the future many times in Hebrews, accompanied by calls to be patient (5:11-12), to wait (9:28), to persevere (10:35-36), to have faith (all of chapter 11) and not grow weary (12:3). By looking forward to what God has promised, we are able to endure the struggles of life and opposition to our faith (13:14). Do you hope for the world to come, or are you short-sighted, only looking forward to a better job, better family situation, or better finances? We can definitely ask God for help in this life, but we should remember that he has promised us greater things than these. If we understand these promises, it helps us learn to be content with what God provides.

The quote from Psalm 8:4-6 and the following explanation address the main objection that Jews had to the gospel: that the Messiah, the Son of God should appear on earth as a man and suffer humiliation and death. This was considered offensive, an insult to God, and therefore impossible. But it was God's plan for Jesus to be made "lower than the angels", i.e. human, for a short time (NASB; footnote in NIV), so that he could die for us. This part of God's plan has been fulfilled. But what about the rest of the plan, to "crown him with glory and honour and put everything under his feet"? Verse 8 explains that this is not completely fulfilled yet (see also Heb 10:13; 1 Cor 15:24-27). Christ is Lord of all, but not everyone acknowledges this fact. How can we honour and glorify him as he deserves?

Further Notes

I have always found it amusing that the reference in verse 6 is so vague - couldn't the author remember where the passage was? - there's hope for all of us!

God's intention from creation was for man to rule the earth (Gen 1:26-28), and the quote from Ps 8 reiterates this intention, which has not yet been fulfilled. However the complete fulfilment will be found only in Jesus (Heb 2:8-9; cf Php 2:6-11). We should understand Ps 8 as a prophecy describing what is now past (Jesus becoming a man), what is present (Jesus being exalted as Lord) and what is future (Jesus being recognised as Lord by all).

For Jesus, the path to glory and honour involved suffering and death (Heb 2:9; 12:2), although occasional glimpses of his glory were revealed before this (Matt 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet 1:17). We also need to die with Jesus (Rom 6:8; 2 Tim 2: 11-12) if we are to share in the glory God originally intended for us (v10).

Heb 2:10-18

Fri 7 Oct

This passage does have a lot of details, so we need to be careful not to get lost in the details and miss the encouraging message, that Jesus identifies with us as his family.

Verse 10 describes Jesus as the "pioneer" or "author" of salvation (see also Heb 12:2; Ac 3:15). In other words, Jesus invented salvation; he established the pathway to God. So can there be any other way to approach God or be saved?

Do you find it strange that verse 10 (and also Heb 5:9; 7:28) says Jesus was "made perfect" or "perfected"? Wasn't Jesus always perfect? Of course he was (and is) perfect! But the key to understanding these verses is to understand that the term "make perfect" in the Old Testament (e.g. Ex 29:33), was a technical term for the appointment (consecration) of a priest. This link gets lost in the English translation, where different words are used. Not until v17 is Jesus called a priest, but this is what the passage (and several chapters of Hebrews) is all about.

Why was suffering necessary to qualify Jesus to be our priest? One reason is that a priest's job is to offer sacrifices, and Jesus' death was the ultimate sacrifice offered for us. Secondly, knowing that Jesus has been tested through the conflicts and sufferings of human life, we can be confident he fully understands and can help us (v18).

In verse 11, we read that Jesus makes us holy, which means we are set apart or special. In what way are we special? The answer is also in v11: we are children of God, and Jesus is our brother.

What is most amazing about this is that Jesus is proud of his family. He identifies with us and sticks up for us, not because of our good behaviour or achievements, but because we have been made holy by his sacrifice (Heb 10:10). Two Old Testament quotes show the close relationship Jesus extends to us: in verse 12 (Ps 22:22) Jesus calls us his brothers, and in verse 13 (Isaiah 8:17-18) he calls us his children (see also Jn 17:6). How do you feel about being part of God's family?

The next two verses remind us of our weakness: we are flesh and blood, and we are all destined to die. We don't like being weak, but Jesus willingly took on human weakness, and experienced suffering, temptation and death. Why did he do this? There are several answers in this passage: to destroy Satan and the power of death (v14), to set us free from the fear of death (v15), to help us (v16) especially when we face temptation (v18), to become our merciful and faithful priest (v17) and to deal with our sins (v17). Spend some time thinking about each of these things that Jesus has done for you, and what it means for you.

Who or what do you turn to when you have problems or temptations? Do you see Jesus as merciful and loyal to you, and ready to help?

Further Notes

In verse 10, it seems strange to talk about what is fitting or appropriate for God to do - who are we to tell God what is right? We only know what is fitting from what God has done! But we can understand the verse as saying that it was consistent with what God had already revealed about his character and purpose, or that it fitted man's need.

In the quote from Ps 22:22, the Messiah praises God despite his suffering. (This whole psalm is about the Messiah and is mentioned several times in the New Testament: v1 in Mk 15:34; v8 in Mt 27:43; v18 in Jn 19:24). Likewise the quote from Is 8:17-18 expresses trust in God during hardship, which is the response we are called to make in other parts of Hebrews.

Remember from yesterday's study that God's intention for the human race was to rule the earth (Gen 1:26-28). Instead, people are enslaved by fear of death. Fear of death is a powerful weapon; under threat of death people commit acts which they would normally be ashamed of, such as betraying friends, family or moral beliefs. If you are at all conscious of your sin and what it deserves, then the fear of death is even greater. For Christians, the situation is very different: we know that Jesus has dealt with our sin, and we look forward to the world to come. This confidence has enabled Christians throughout the ages to endure persecution, and the letter to the Hebrews was written in a context of persecution (Heb 10:32-39).

Abraham's descendants (verse 16) includes all who believe (Gal 3:7; Rom 4:11), not necessarily his physical descendants (Jn 8:39-40).

One of the most important topics in Hebrews is that Jesus is our high priest. This is why he was made like us, and why he faced suffering and temptation as we do, so that he could understand us, represent us and help us when we go through struggles. In the Old Testament, the high priest's most important task was to deal with sin, which was done by performing a sacrifice to reconcile the people to God; in the New Testament Jesus is both the priest and the sacrifice who takes away our sins (Heb 9:7,11-12).

Heb 3:1-6

Mon 10 Oct

The theme of this section is to show Jesus' superiority over Moses. It was important to show this to both Jewish and Gentile Christians, since there was a high regard for Moses and the Law.

The writer is addressing the Jewish Christians as "holy" (sanctified or set apart) on the basis that they share or partake in the same heavenly calling through their allegiance to Christ Jesus. Their holy standing with Christ was to be considered far superior to earning ritualistic holiness through the Law of Moses.

Only in this letter has the word "apostle" been used to describe Jesus when usually in the NT it is used to refer to his original followers. Here it literally shows Jesus as one sent by God (the messenger or special envoy). In Jesus' prayer to God (John 17:18), he reveals himself as the prototype apostle; as God has sent Jesus out into the world, so he in turn now sends his loyal disciples into the world. Additionally, Jesus also holds the office of High Priest which is far superior to the earthly Aaronic priesthoods; this is explained more in Heb 5,7, and 9. To the Israelites under the old covenant, Moses was also sent by God but, unlike Jesus, Moses only held one office (apostle/prophet)

whereas Jesus is described as being both the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. This use of the word “confession” is consistent with other passages in the letter (4:14, 10:23) with regards to holding to their confession of hope (the hope that they profess). This I believe is central to and strongly linked with their faith in Christ. It is only through this confession or allegiance to Jesus (and not the allegiance to the apostleship of Moses or the Aaronic priesthood) can they be truly sanctified and share in God’s heavenly calling.

Both Jesus and Moses were faithful to God who appointed them (Moses to a lesser degree). Moses is described as a faithful servant in all of His (God’s) house. What is this house?.. well this includes the theocratic community, perhaps the Israelite people of God of OT, or even the entire kingdom of God. What’s interesting is that the writer seems only to be talking about one house not two, with God being the architect. Certainly the builder is given greater honour than the house itself. So why would Jesus be given greater honour and glory than Moses? Jesus is not just a servant in God’s household; he is a Son. He shares divinity with God and as an heir was appointed over all things including the created universe (1:2-3). Hence it is safe to say that Jesus shares the honour of co builder over God’s house. Besides divinity, sonship attached an inheritance of ownership over his father’s house and everything in it whereas the servant only worked for the master in the house; the servant certainly did not own the house. Both the reader and writer understood this cultural expectation.

Based on the superiority of Jesus, the writer was exhorting the Jewish Christians to be confident, proud of Jesus and tenacious in their hope.

Questions

- Why was it important for the writer to compare Moses to Jesus?
- Which offices do you think Jesus fulfilled that made him superior?

Heb 3:7-11

Tue 11 Oct

The writer now uses a citation from Psalms 95:7-11 to challenge his audience to respond in faith to this superior Jesus. As will be explained in chapter 4, the use of the word “today” makes God’s living voice valid in the time of the Hebrew Christians as it was in the days of David’s kingdom one millennium earlier. David warned his own people “the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand” against unbelief.

In the Psalm the warning was that if God’s voice is heard, that the people of God should not harden their hearts like the people in the days of Massah and Meribah in the wilderness. (There is a slight variance in the text since the OT Psalm is translated directly from the Hebrew Massoretic text, while the NT Hebrew writer quoted from the Greek Septuagintal version of the Psalm; the meaning is not lost nevertheless.) Why are Massah and Meribah significant? These were places in Rephidim appropriately named to signify when the Israelites tested and quarrelled with the Lord through Moses (Exod 17:1-7). It had been less than two months since God delivered them from Egypt with mighty miraculous wonders. They on behalf of their families complained that their basic human needs were not being met. In fact, grumbling and testing God was a characteristic trait that was consistent with this generation throughout their forty years in the desert (Exod 14:10-11, 15:22-24, 16:1-3, 17:1-7, 32:1, Num 11:1-4, 12:1-2, 14:1-4, 16:1-41, 20:1-5, 21:4-5). Many of these events were acts/words of rebellion against God leading to the provocation of God’s anger.

In less than two years from leaving Egypt, God in His wrath swore that this fighting generation would not enter the promised land of Canaan (God’s rest). The issue with the Israelites was that their hearts were led astray and hardened. This subsequently made it harder for them to understand God’s ways.

Let’s look at an event that was a turning point in God’s decision. It was not God’s original plan that Israel should spend forty years needlessly wandering in the desert. Once the people had settled in Kadesh Barnea in the wilderness of Paran (Num 13:26), the plan was to take the promised land from the south through the Negev. Had the representatives of Israel who spied the land been faithful in their report, all the people would have entered the promised land in two years. In Num

14:1-4 we see that the people not only grumbled against Moses and Aaron, but against the Lord Himself. Rather than be faithful with the challenges of entering Canaan, Egypt (the former world that enslaved them) was now more desirable. Having lost faith in God (in fact they declared that God hated them for sending them on such a dangerous mission Deut 1:26-27), they decided to appoint another leader who would agree with them and head back to Egypt. This lack of faith had consequences for their wives and children. The hardened heart made treacherous Egypt look like the more sensible and comfortable option. God spoke to the people through the warnings of Caleb, Joshua and Moses (Num 14:7-9) to be faithful and not fearful and so rebel. They heard God's voice but they did not truly listen in obedience (Num 14:22). Even though Israel's sin was pardoned it was not without punishment. With the exception of Caleb and Joshua, over 600,000 men of military age were never to see the promised land, and their children would suffer forty years in the desert for their fathers' sins until the military generation had all perished.

This is how seriously God viewed the attitude of the Jewish Christians through the Hebrew writer. The context was that the Hebrews should not harden their hearts to God's voice through the second Moses (Christ) and turn back to Judaism – a safe religion protected by the Roman government.

Heb 3:12-19

Wed 12 Oct

With the example seen from Israel's history, the writer urges the Hebrew Christians not to have evil, unbelieving hearts that fall away from God. But how can this be, if they are returning to Judaism—a faith that has always professed the one true living God. The implication is clear. By rejecting your hope and faith in Christ with a superior covenant, priesthood and sacrifice than in Judaism, reverting to Judaism would be reverting to dead works (6:1, 9:14) and the absence of God.

It would have been easy to rationalise why it would be more convenient to return to Judaism which had the status of a legal religion in the Roman Empire. It was a recognised religion because there was a recognised political state (currently a Roman province) associated with it. However, like other oriental cult faiths, Christianity in its infancy was an illegal “superstition”; they were private cult beliefs which had no legal acceptance in the Empire especially since they had no nation or particular ethnic grouping associated with them. For the first two decades Christianity had adequate “umbrella” protection from Judaism, but later as the church diversified with more Gentiles converting, Jewish-Gentile tension increased. In the late 60s persecution increased and with the loss of the temple in 70AD Christianity lost its protection. These factors had economic implications. Jewish Christians were in a position of choosing their loyalties (to their Jewish heritage or to the Gentile Christian community). To settle back into mainstream Judaism was more attractive than holding on to their hope in Christ with the discomfort it faced. This was a sin of deception for these Hebrews. They all needed encouraging daily; they needed to heed God's voice daily to prevent hardening hearts.

The writer stresses the same message by repeating part of the citation (Psalm 95:7) and explaining that the OT Israelites who were delivered from Egypt provoked God many times, and in their sin of unfaithfulness were disobedient. The writer is driving home the point that his audience should learn from. The Israelites did not enter God's rest due to unbelief.

From the physical rest (Canaan) the writer now describes a spiritual concept, God's rest for Christian believers, in Chapter 4.

Questions

- What do you think made sin so deceptive for the Israelites coming out of Egypt?

Heb 4:1-13

Thu 13 Oct

The writer continues the theme from chapter three on God's rest: the promise of God's rest still remains for the Hebrews, and by extension to Christians today if we heed God's voice "today". The writer warns the Hebrews to be reverent and careful that they do not miss out on entering. What would this rest have meant to the Hebrews? The physical land of Canaan (Palestine)?

The old covenant Israelites of the wilderness received good news just like the new covenant saints. The good news in the wilderness was the report given by the twelve tribal representatives who spied the land of Canaan for forty days. The news was that the land was exceedingly good and that God would give them the land if they are faithful and not fearful (Num 13:27, 14:7-8). Ten out of the twelve leaders were negative and focussed on the obstacles of taking the land, damaging the faith of many in the congregation. Only Joshua, Caleb, Aaron and Moses remained faithful at this point. In verse 2 there are two possible ways of reading the text. Certainly, although all the Israelites heard the good news, many however did not benefit from this news either because they did not combine it with faith alongside the few that did believe or they were not united with those who heard the news with faith. Either way, the meaning is the same and the missing ingredient was faith.

The writer assures the Hebrews that they enter into God's rest having converted to Christ (4:3). This was a present reality for the Hebrews, not just a future hope. This rest must be a spiritual promise which shares both a present reality and a future reality as we will later see.

The writer relates God's rest to His Sabbath rest from creation on the seventh day (Gen 2:4) and that anyone who enters the Sabbath rest (4:9) also would rest from his works as God did from His (4:10)

The use of the word "today" in verse seven (David speaking centuries after Joshua) does not restrict the promise to the time of Joshua or even David. Verse eleven also shows us that the Hebrew believers needed to be diligent to enter the rest, implying a future reality for those who are not disobedient. (Throughout the Bible there are many themes which have present and future aspects: salvation, the resurrection, holiness, the kingdom of God, predestination and freewill, and of course the Sabbath rest.)

Since the voice of God could be heard "today", God's word is alive and relevant to the Hebrews. It is active and effective in the sense that it is intended to produce obedience from faith.

The image of God's word as a divisive sword denotes precision. It can penetrate into our whole being, weeding out every secret or thought for judgement.

Questions

- What was the Sabbath rest for the Israelites and what would that be for us do you think?
- Spiritually speaking, what do the desert wanderings represent, both for the readers and for us?
- How do we respond to the trials and temptations in the desert?
- Who modelled Israel and overcame the temptations in his wilderness?

Heb 4:14-16

Fri 14 Oct

In this section up until chapter nine, the writer focuses our attention back on the superiority of Jesus as our High Priest. Unlike the existing Levitical priesthood, Jesus has gone through the heavens as the great High Priest; Jesus has transcended to the very presence of God whereas the Aaronic priest only had limited access beyond the veil of the temple once a year (a shadow of the reality). Allegiance to Jesus Christ the Son of God was much weightier than to the weak fleshly high priest. Jesus on earth lived as a man and suffered the trials and tests that mankind faces. Although Jesus had no weaknesses and did not sin, he sympathised with our weaknesses. The Levitical priest could not help because he was weak and needy himself (5:2; 7:28). Remember that Jesus was without sin. Besides all the sacrifices made for unintentional sin (Lev 4,5), there was an annual Day of

Atonement, on which the High Priest atoned for the sin of himself and his household as well as the whole congregation.

Hebrews 4:14 – 7:28

Moving on from discussion of Jesus as God's Son, this section deals with Jesus as the merciful high priest in the service of God, emphasising his full humanity and solidarity with us. It begins as a comparison between the Levitical priesthood and Jesus' priesthood, comparing and contrasting with Aaron. Following a section where the writer addresses the congregation's apathy and warns them of the danger of apostasy, he moves on to discuss in detail the role of Melchizedek and the superior order of priesthood that he foreshadowed (chapter 7).

Heb 4:14 – 5:4

Mon 17 Oct

In this section, the theme of the High Priest is introduced, with an emphasis on the solidarity of the priest with the people; the writer begins to compare the Levitical high priesthood with the priesthood of Jesus.

Questions of the Text

- Looking at Heb 5:2 and 5:4 in particular, what are two characteristics of the Levitical High Priests?
- Considering this passage, does Jesus also fit these characteristics?
- Look at v4:14 – why do you think the writer uses Jesus' personal name, together with the title "Son of God", at this particular point?
- Find, in the passage, a distinction made between Jesus and all other High Priests and indeed any other human being.

Questions for Us

- Consider v4:16 – we, too, can draw near to God's throne in prayer, at any time of need. Even the High Priest could draw near to God only once a year under the old covenant. How do you feel about the amazing privilege of prayer?
- What kinds of thoughts might make you lack confidence, in approaching God's throne of grace?
- What do you think might be included in the phrase "in time of need"? What does it mean to you?

Further Notes

As previously discussed, the letter of Hebrews appears to be addressed to a church which at that time was predominantly composed of Jewish Christians, quite possibly the church in Rome. It would be essential for this audience (who would previously have kept the OT Law with its Levitical system of sacrifices) to show how Jesus fulfilled and superseded the office of High Priest. In the Levitical system the office of High Priest was of fundamental importance, since the high priest made key sacrifices to God in intercession for the whole nation. The writer's argument for the superiority of Christ is therefore deliberately framed here in the terms of priesthood. By ch 7 of the letter, however, a completely alternative priesthood (the order of Melchizedek), which is Jesus' priesthood, is being presented as superior.

Note that Jesus both fulfils the qualities of a High Priest, and also far exceeds them. Here, he is described as having passed through the heavens – meaning that he is now in the presence of God, and able to minister to us from there, which is a great encouragement to our faithfulness.

For the divine appointment of high priests, see Ex 28:1, Num 3:10, 18:1-7. As to their being able to sympathise with the weaknesses of others, note that the law itself recognised that the high priest was fallible/ weak – although higher expectations and stricter regulations did apply to them

– Lev 21; Lev 4:3-12; 9:7. E.g. Aaron himself was fallible (see Ex 32); see also Zech 3:3-5. This is why high priests also had to offer sacrifices for their own sins: which, of course, is something that Jesus did not need to do.

Heb 5:5-10

Tue 18 Oct

While Jesus was similar to Aaron in being divinely appointed, the writer now moves on to the crucial differences between the two.

Questions

- Why do you think the writer makes clear that Jesus did not “glorify himself” to become a high priest? (Re-read yesterday’s notes for some help.)
- Think about Jesus having “learned obedience” and having been “made perfect”. Is this a bit difficult to understand, bearing in mind what we believe as Christians about Jesus Christ?
- Note the passion and suffering evident in the description of Jesus’ prayers while he was on earth. What does this tell you about him?
- Think about your own prayer life. Would the description in 5:7 apply? How would you describe your prayer life?

Further Notes

Two Psalms are quoted from here. The citation from Psalm 2 (v7) is used to show that Jesus was chosen by God (see also citation at Heb 1:5). Psalm 110:4 is referred to three times directly (5:6, 7:17, 7:21) and there are a number of allusions to it as well, e.g. 5:10. In fact there are more references to Psalm 110:4 in the book of Hebrews than to any other Biblical text. The primary reason for citing Ps 110:4 is that it supplies a scriptural basis/ substance for the argument that Jesus is a heavenly high priest.

Jesus is described as having “learned obedience” from what he suffered, and of having been “made perfect”. It is difficult to understand, when we accept that Jesus was in very nature God and therefore perfect in all ways, why he would have “learned” obedience and been made perfect. Note that the term “make perfect” in the Old Testament (e.g. Ex 29:33) was a technical term for the appointment or consecration of a priest (see QT on Heb 2:10-18). Another suggestion may be that as God’s son, Jesus was ordained by Scripture to suffer death; so he freely accepted his suffering because he had to do it for the sake of his office. It was through this obedience, and after suffering death on the cross as priestly representative of the people, that Jesus was brought to the goal appointed to him by God, and through which he became a perfect high priest.

Note that Melchizedek – the first priest mentioned in Scripture - is mentioned for the first time here at v5:6 and 5:10.

Heb 5:11-6:3

Wed 19 Oct

In 5:11 – 6:12, the writer provides a strong warning to the community about the danger of spiritual immaturity putting them in danger of apostasy.

The writer has announced the subject of Jesus’ priesthood, but is first alerting them to the complexity of the subject (“hard to explain”). He will not start to develop this theme until he has addressed their sluggishness and current lack of receptivity to the gospel. In this section, he wants to persuade them that they are mature and must take on the responsibilities of a mature group of Christians, in a hostile society.

Questions of the Text

- Why, do you think, does the writer refer at v12 to their needing milk rather than solid food? Why do you think the writer does not then go on to basic instruction?
- What do you think – for the original readers – would be included in “press[ing] on to maturity”?

Questions for Us

- Consider your own journey as a Christian. Can you relate to the danger of spiritual lethargy or immaturity? If so, is this an overall problem, or is it in a particular area of your life? Discuss with another mature disciple and if need be, consider how to address this.
- Consider 5:12. Are you currently able to teach others the “elementary principles of the oracles of God” - and if so, are you doing this in some way?
- What sort of diet do you need to help you grow in maturity? Do you have this diet at present? If not, what can you do about it?

Further Notes

The importance of responsible listening (5:11) is also emphasised elsewhere in Hebrews – see 2:1; 3:7-8, 15; 4:1-2.

Note also that the writings of Polycarp (second century) include reference to “obeying the word of righteousness” in the context of suffering and martyrdom. It may be that the original readers of Hebrews were avoiding contact with, and attempts to teach (5:12), outsiders because they feared martyrdom.

“Solid food” here may refer to the instruction about the high priestly office of Christ to be dealt with at 7:1 – 10:18.

Heb 6:4-12

Thu 20 Oct

The writer warns sternly that deliberate apostasy will result in the permanent loss of all the benefits they have gained in Christ; he follows this, however, with expressions of confidence and optimism about the congregation he is writing to.

Questions

- Do you think it is possible that the persons addressed were not saved? (See v4-5)
- Consider what is meant by “fallen away”. Do you think it necessarily means the same as “wanders away” (James 5:19-20)?
- Look at v7-8. How does God decide how to judge the land? What is the point of this illustration, for the people addressed in this letter (and, perhaps, for us)?
- What reasons can you find, in the passage, for the writer remaining confident about the community? (v9-12; also look ahead to 10:32-34; I found two main reasons.)
- Thinking about your own journey as a Christian, consider when your service to God and others has been at its best. Note the emphasis in v11-12 on continuing to the end, and on endurance. How can you best “imitate those who inherit the promises”?

Further Notes

Heb 6:6 – read also Heb 3:12 and 10:26-31. The verb “fall away” is in the aorist tense, i.e. indicating a one-time definite event, indicating that there is a moment of commitment to apostasy/ rejection of the Christian faith. This would be similar to the rejection of the divine promise by the Exodus generation at Kadesh (see Heb 3:7 – 4:2). In the context of this letter, apostasy could well entail a return to Jewish convictions and practices and/or a public denial of faith for personal gain. (See also notes in QT on 10:26-31.) The reason it is impossible to renew a person to repentance in this situation is that the very foundation of repentance – that is, the foundation of the Word concerning Christ – has been rejected.

On this, read also Proverbs 29:1, and James 5:19-20. Ideally, read these passages in more than one translation. The passage from James makes very clear that a disciple might wander from the truth and yet be brought back; the disciples are effectively directed to try to bring back the strays. It seems therefore that wandering may take place from which repentance and return is possible; however, it is also very clear that there is a point beyond which no return is possible.

Re vs 7-8, agricultural illustrations were (understandably) common in ancient times. Look at Genesis 3:17-18; the growth of thorns and thistles is the end result of the curse resulting from human disobedience. The seriousness of the fire of judgment is emphasised later in Hebrews at 10:27 and 12:29. It is clear that the disciples to whom Hebrews was addressed had been watered and blessed by God; see 6:4-5. References to blessing and curse also bring us back to the covenant; while blessings are associated with obedience, the curse sanctions result from apostasy and disobedience – see Deut 11:26-28. See the example of the cities of the Jordan plain referred to at Deut 29:22-25 (see Genesis 13:10, 19:24).

Heb 6:13-20

Fri 21 Oct

Following the appeal to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (v12), the writer goes on to give an example that will provide a solid basis for their confidence. Abraham is a prime example of faithful endurance when tested; his willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrates the sort of steadfast trust and commitment appropriate to heirs of the divine promise. (Mention of Abraham also ties us in neatly to the subsequent discussion of Melchizedek in chapter 7.)

Questions

- Given his audience, why do you think might the writer have wanted to use the example of Abraham?
- God clearly wanted to put the certainty of His fulfilling His promise beyond any possible doubt. What does this tell you about God’s character, and what does this mean for you?
- How would you define the “hope” that is referred to in v18-19?
- The passage says that our hope enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. What do you think this means – both to the original readers, and what it might mean for us today?
- To what extent is your hope in Christ a steadfast anchor for your soul? Does your soul drift a bit, as if not firmly anchored, at times? If so, discuss with another mature disciple how you could start to deal with this.

Further Notes

Abraham is mentioned several times in Hebrews: 2:16, 6:13-15, 7:4-5, 11:8-19. Abraham received the promise, and God’s confirming oath, after enduring the most severe trial of his faith (v13-15, see Genesis 22:1-18). The disciples who originally received the letter of Hebrews would have been well aware that God’s promise to Abraham was kept; indeed they are, in a way, some of the heirs of that continuing promise.

The Old Testament prescribed oaths to be taken in Yahweh’s name (see Deut 6:13, 10:20); Abraham himself swore by God e.g. Genesis 14:22. Oaths are seen as final for confirming something.

While the “two unchangeable things” are not specified in the text, they most probably refer to God’s promise and his oath. Given the purpose of giving God’s promise to Abraham as an example – i.e. to reassure and give confidence to the community – it seems that they (and we) should view God’s promise to us as just as certain and irrevocable as this promise to Abraham.

Christ himself is the word of promise (Heb 1:2) – and his achievement in redeeming us has been confirmed with an unalterable oath (see the citations of Psalm 110:4).

Like the illustration of the field/ thorns/ thistles discussed above, use of the anchor as a metaphor was widespread in the ancient world. It appears in Greek literature as evoking stability. Our hope in Christ is our anchor; our hope is described as having entered behind the curtain – i.e. drawing near to God, even to the innermost sanctuary, where Jesus has already entered.

Verse 20 closes this section with reference back to Jesus having become a high priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek – leading neatly into chapter 7, where the significance of Melchizedek is examined in detail.

Hebrews 7:1-28

In this section, the writer’s main concern is to describe the nature of Jesus’ priestly office, and to show that it is superior to the Levitical priesthood. He uses the incident of Melchizedek’s meeting with Abraham to show the priority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests. In Genesis 14:17-20 and Psalm 110:4, referred to throughout the chapter, the writer finds the clear implication that the Levitical priesthood will be replaced by the eternal priesthood of Jesus that was foreshadowed and prefigured in the person of Melchizedek.

Heb 7:1-10

Mon 24 Oct

In this section, the writer uses Melchizedek’s meeting with Abraham to show the priority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests.

Questions

- vs1-3 are a summary of the Genesis account, at Genesis 14:17-20. Read both. Has the writer of Hebrews included everything in the Genesis account? If not, can you think of any reason why he might have left that aspect out?
- v3. There is no information about Melchizedek’s ancestry or line of descent, nor his birth or death. What conclusion does the writer of Hebrews draw from this information (see end of v3)? How does this circumstance make Melchizedek very different to the priests appointed under the Levitical system?
- What details in the passage show Melchizedek’s greatness?
- Looking at vs 4-10, what differences are described between Melchizedek and the Levitical priests, that are used to show Melchizedek’s superiority? See if you can draw up a small table of comparisons.

Further Notes

Melchizedek was both king and priest, in contrast to the later Hebrew kings (who up to the time of the divided kingdoms, came from the tribe of Judah). Note that he is not a redeemer like Jesus, and he does not perform any saving act in the Genesis account; he is a historical figure serving as a precedent for a priesthood not based on lineage (i.e. being descended from Levi) or the law.

Salem may have been at the location that eventually became Jerusalem (although a case can be made for locating Salem at ancient Shechem).

Melchizedek’s attributed name and title are associated with righteousness and peace (Salem means peace). A theme in the Gospel is that God’s righteousness (and his making us righteous) goes hand in hand with the peace we can enjoy (see Rom 5:1 and compare with Rom 3:21-22).

The Melchizedek priesthood is perpetual, “without beginning and without end” (v3). Note, in this verse, an interesting principle of interpretation – that even silence has a significance and can be used to develop an argument. Note, here, how Psalm 110:4 (“you are a priest forever ...”) appears to be informing the writer’s view of the Genesis account of Melchizedek; Psalm 110:4 is very relevant when we read ch 7:11-28 tomorrow.

Note that for the Levitical priesthood, recorded line of descent was required for accession to the priestly office; see Exodus 28:1, Lev 21:13-15, etc. and Ezra 2:61-3, Nehemiah 7:63-5. Melchizedek’s priesthood, on the other hand, must have been based on an individual call from God.

Heb 7:11-28

Tue 25 Oct

The Levitical priesthood was fulfilled and superseded by the priesthood of Christ. The Levitical institution could not attain the goal of perfection, but Christ can do so; Psalm 110:4 is seen as announcing the establishment of a new covenant, based on the oath of God Himself.

Questions

- Could Jesus have been a priest under the Levitical system, according to this section? If not, why not?
- Looking at v12 and v18-19, what is the writer saying? What has happened to the old priesthood and law?
- Looking at v18-19a – why does the writer say the Law was weak and useless? See Heb 9:9-10, 13, 23; 10:14.
- What are the distinguishing features of Jesus’ priesthood, as set out in this section? Do a short table of comparison between Jesus and the Levitical priesthood.
- Are there ever occasions in which you are tempted to wonder whether Jesus’ sacrifice is truly as effective as reported in v26 (“once and for all”) ?

Further Notes

v16 refers to the power of an indestructible life. It is clear the writer was firmly convinced that the resurrection provided evidence of Jesus’ indestructible life; this results in his central focus on Psalm 110:4. Death was part of Jesus’ ministry, but death could not hold on to him.

Psalm 110:4 – already cited directly at 5:6 and 7:17 – is cited again here, at v21. Here, God appears to address Jesus directly; He makes a solemn oath, which is strengthened further by the addition of “will not change his mind”; Jesus’ appointment is the realisation of the promise narrated in the Psalm. The Levitical priesthood was not established by a solemn oath; the new priesthood of Jesus was unconditionally validated by God’s solemn oath. (For a similar oath, see God’s word of promise to Abraham referred to at Heb 6:13-18.)

It is plain from v23-5 (see also v16) that Jesus continues forever – he has a permanent and final priesthood and needs no successors. The multiplicity of high priests under the Law/ old covenant meant its continuity was repeatedly interrupted, by death, though provision had been made accordingly for successors. See Hebrews 7:3 – the priesthood of Melchizedek was seen, by the writer, as continuing without interruption. (There was a practical significance here for the writer of Hebrews – he wanted to reassure the congregation that Jesus is effective and able to save them now and forever.)

Verse 26 summarises the character of Jesus – the high priest that we need. “Devout/ holy” - faithful and obedient to the covenant. “Innocent/ pure/ guileless” - not touched by evil. “Undeified/ unstained” - indicates cultic purity. The qualities of Jesus as high priest contrast with the Law’s requirements of the Levitical priests: ritual purity (Lev 21:11) and bodily integrity (Lev 21:17). Our high priest is qualified by spiritual and moral perfection. None of us – leaders or congregation – can meet these requirements! Jesus is unique. As a result of these qualities, Jesus is able to make the definitive and final sacrifice. Note this goes well beyond what was said of Melchizedek, who in the

OT account has no connection with sacrifice. “Once” – contrasts with the many sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood - “many” signifying incompleteness, or imperfection.

Note also that the “double sacrifice” refers to the Day of Atonement – but the double sacrifice was not made on a daily basis. The writer seems to have regarded all sacrifices as having the purpose of atonement. Jesus’ sacrifice can certainly be seen as an atoning sacrifice.

Hebrews 8: Jesus the Great High Priest

Chapter 7 established that priests didn’t necessarily have to come from the tribe of Levi – the example being Melchizedek, and that Jesus qualified to be a High Priest because of his sacrificial life, not because of his family line. It also mentioned that the Old Covenant was to be replaced with a new one. Hebrews 8 continues these ideas.

Heb 8:1-5

Wed 26 Oct

Questions

- What role do verses 1 & 2 say Jesus has now?
- How does Jesus differ from the priests of the Old Covenant?
- What do you think it means in verse 1, that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven”?
- Verses 3-5: What did Jesus offer to God as priest, and how does that differ from what the Old Covenant priests offered?
- What do we learn in verse 5 about the physical tabernacle that Moses was commissioned to build? Why do you think the Hebrews writer tells us this?
- If you were a Jewish Christian (i.e. you had been a Jew then converted to Christianity), what do you think you would feel when reading in these verses about the familiar Old Covenant (Jewish) terms such as Priesthood and Tabernacle?

Further Notes

Read Ex 26 about the tabernacle design and Moses experience. In Ex 25:9 and Ex 25:40, God instructs Moses to build the tabernacle according to what he “sees”. Imagine that you were Moses – you are shown some kind of vision of heaven, and then have to build what you see, with the help of some further detailed instructions too! Imagine the feeling of achievement and honour at being able to build and worship at this exact copy, revealed by God. However, Hebrews 8:5 reveals that Jesus serves at something much better – the actual, real heavenly tabernacle. Hebrews here is making the point that whereas the Jews were excited and proud of being able to worship at an exact copy of the spiritual tabernacle, Christians should be much more excited and proud for being able to worship at the real tabernacle (through Jesus, the mediator).

Heb 8:6-13 Why do we need a New Covenant? Thu 27 Oct

After explaining the need for a High Priest to mediate between us and God, and that Jesus was the one who was qualified to be that High Priest, Hebrews continues with other vital ingredients in this new agreement or covenant between God and man. The need for a new covenant is described now.

Questions

- How would you summarise the Old and New Covenants?

- What does the word “covenant” mean, when applied to God and people?
- From your knowledge of the Old Testament, how well did the Jews do at keeping to the terms of the Old Covenant?
- Verse 7 says that there was something wrong with the Old Covenant – what does verse 8 reveal was the problem?
- Verses 8-12 (the quote from Jeremiah): what are some key points in this “new covenant” that remind you of how Christians can have a relationship with God today?
- Why do you think it was important for the writer of Hebrews to include a quote from the Old Testament that prophesied a time when there would be a new covenant?

Further Notes

Verses 4 and 13 imply that the Jewish Temple and sacrificial system was still standing and being used by Jews. This suggests that the date of Hebrews is before AD70, when the Romans destroyed the temple to crush a Jewish rebellion. Notice that the Hebrews writer is taking familiar religious concepts, like the priesthood, and now the Covenant, and carefully showing them to be inadequate. The writer is challenging the readers, but also persuading them. Verse 13 is very clear however: the old covenant is obsolete because it has been replaced. The two covenants don't run side by side, one replaces the other. How familiar are we with the idea of a “covenant” between two people? Perhaps the easiest example we are used to is a marriage covenant (or vows). The bride and groom make vows (i.e. promises) to each other, specifying how they feel but also what they will do for their spouse (cherish you in sickness and health etc). They do this in front of witnesses, and use the ring to symbolise that the vows have been made. The vows are all part of the commitment they are making to each other. When the couple are madly in love, they don't have to refer to the vows to remind their spouse of their commitment, as everything “just flows”. But as time goes on, or when new challenges come, the relationship may get weak, and takes much more hard work to maintain. This is where the couple may find themselves asking “why should I continue in this relationship, it's hard?” But then the answer may be “because I made a vow”. It's the bottom line. It keeps the couple together and allows them time to get back in love again. God also makes covenants (vows) with people, and these covenants express commitment between God and people, and also what the people need to do to express their love for God (conditions). The extent to which the people keep doing the conditions reveals their love for God. The New Covenant also has conditions, but is much more focused on having a deep love for God, without the rituals of the Old Covenant.

Heb 9:1-10 The Earthly Tabernacle

Fri 28 Oct

Why did God set up the tabernacle (and later temple) as central parts of worship, if they were actually not needed for the new covenant? This is a question the Jewish Christians may have had, and Hebrews now explains how the tabernacle (temple) arrangements pointed towards Jesus mediating as High Priest for us.

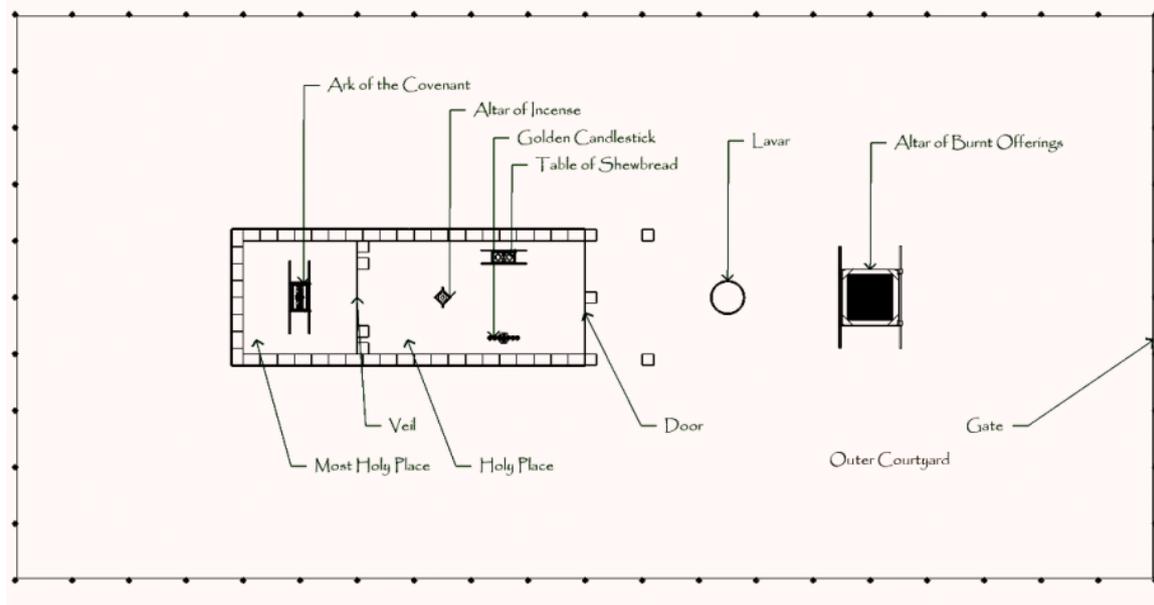
Questions

- Verses 1-5: how do you think the Jews felt about the tabernacle and its objects of worship described in these verses?
- What spiritual meaning do you think each of the objects mentioned had for Jews?
- Why do you think it would have been attractive for Jewish Christians to keep to the old Jewish worship system summarised in these verses?
- What challenges to the old covenant worship system does the Hebrews writer have in verse 7?
- What conclusion does the Hebrew writer draw about the effectiveness of the old covenant worship system in verse 9?

- How do we try to clear our consciences? Think about what Jesus has done for us, and then think about how we respond when we realise we have sinned.

Further Notes

The O.T. references for v.4 are Numbers 17:8 (Aaron's rod), Exodus 16:33 (the golden pot), and Deuteronomy 5:22 (the tablets). High Priest offering sins for himself: Lev 9:7, and 16:6. The Hebrews writer explains the physical layout of the tabernacle (temple), which the readers were familiar with, and then uses this to make a key spiritual conclusion in verse 8: as long as the old covenant tabernacle/temple was valid (still standing, i.e. in use), there was no way to get close to God (i.e. get to the Most Holy Place). The Hebrews writer describes the tabernacle (which later became the temple in Jerusalem) but is not too concerned with the fine details of the objects of worship. The writer wants to compare it with the true spiritual tabernacle in heaven, by showing its inadequacies. Then the superiority of Jesus makes sense as it follows the discussion of the inadequacy of the Old Covenant worship. This is a diagram of the tabernacle and later temple.



Heb 9:11-15 The Heavenly Tabernacle

Mon 31 Oct

The book of Hebrews often takes Old Covenant elements and shows them as foreshadows of, or pointing to, elements of the New Covenant. The next section continues this by beginning to look at the New Covenant equivalent to the tabernacle (temple).

Questions

- In the gospels we read about Jesus life as a man. What do we learn here in verse 11 about his spiritual, i.e. non earthly life?
- Have you ever wondered what heaven is like? What glimpse of heaven do we get here?
- Compare this passage with 9:1-10, by completing the table below:

	Old Covenant	New Covenant
Where were the sacrifices offered?	Earthly tabernacle	
Who could enter the Most Holy place?	High Priest	
How often could they enter the Most Holy place?	Once a year only	
What blood was required to enter the Most Holy place?	Animal sacrifices	
Who was the blood offered for?	High Priest and the rest of the Jews	
Did it clear the conscience of the worshipper?	No	
Any other contrasts you can find		

- Why does the Hebrew writer go to such lengths to make this comparison with the Old Covenant worship and Jesus?
- In verses 1-10, we noted that the Old Covenant never gave the worshipper a clean conscience. What is the conclusion of verse 14, and how should we feel about that?
- In verse 14 Christ is described as “unblemished”; have you ever tried to imagine what effort and perseverance it took Jesus to remain free from sin his entire life?

Further Notes

This passage follows the previous one (1-10) as a dramatic contrast – the Hebrews writer is encouraging the readers that the Old Covenant worship was good, but that the New Covenant worship is so much better. The writer does this by showing lots of concepts that the readers are all familiar and comfortable with, and then showing how Jesus’ way is superior. This is really a focus for much of chapters 1 to 10. Lev 16: the day of atonement, where the High Priest enters the Most Holy place once a year. Verse 15 summarises the argument and reasoning of the previous verses.

Heb 9:16-28 Blood and Purification

Tue 1 Nov

You will recall in the gospels during the last supper that Jesus talked about the “blood of the new covenant”. This section discusses the role of blood in the old and new covenants, as well as continuing to describe the heavenly tabernacle.

Questions

- A will is another kind of agreement between two people (like marriage vows). What is the similarity between a will and the spiritual covenants that Hebrews is describing?
- What was the spiritual purpose of blood under the Old Covenant according to verses 18 – 22?
- What does this imply about the need for Jesus to offer his blood when he went before God?
- What is the point that Hebrews is making in verses 25 to 28 concerning repetition and Jesus sacrifice?

Further Notes

Legally speaking, for a will to become valid, the death of the testator is necessary. So it is with the death of Christ and the new covenant (vv.15-17). This was the case with the old covenant (vv.18-22) and so it is with the new covenant (vv.23-26). Verse 16: the Greek for “will” and “covenant” is the same word. Moses and the blood of the covenant (9:20) – See Exodus 24:8. Blood required for

forgiveness (9:22) – see Leviticus 17:11. Imagine living under the Old Covenant, and being present to watch the slaughter of the animal sacrifices. Imagine all the blood being splattered, the noise of the animals led one by one to their deaths, then their remains being dragged out lifeless and dead. You see this year after year, from childhood, as a teenager, then as an adult. You might wonder “why all this blood and slaughter? Isn’t it enough just to come and say ‘sorry’ to God for the things we have done wrong?” As humans we have a tendency to minimise the hurt we do to others, and can be surprised that something we said or did hurt someone else. Yet the message of the need for sacrifice in both covenants teaches us that our sin does indeed hurt God, and that only something extremely precious can heal the wounds. Verse 23: Why should “heavenly things” need to be purified, if they are already in heaven? There are several suggestions. One is that the heavenly tabernacle was somehow defiled by human sin, and therefore needed to be purified by Jesus. Another is that the heavenly tabernacle was not defiled, but that the purification in verse 23 refers to the consciences of Christians who come before God. Verses 25-28: The writer emphasises that Christ only needed to die once to provide forgiveness for Christians, in contrast to the Old Covenant annual sacrifices that were repeated year after year. Once again, this shows the superior nature of Christ’s sacrifice compared to the Old Covenant sacrifices, a bit like the difference between renting a house (you keep paying but it’s never yours to own) and buying a house (one much larger payment and it’s yours to own). Verse 27: Can be used to show to our non-Christian friends that reincarnation is not true, though that was not why it was written here!

Heb 10:1-18 The Volunteer

Wed 2 Nov

This section looks once more at Jesus, now using another OT quote and reminding us of the Jeremiah 31 passage from chapter 8.

Questions

- How does it feel when someone reminds you of your sin, again and again and again ... ? You may feel like giving up, that you can never overcome, or be free. What do verses 1-4 say about this for those under the Old Covenant?
- In what sense was God not pleased with burnt offerings and sacrifices (verse 6)?
- What aspects of Jesus heart and love for us do we see in this quote from Psalm 40?
- How do we feel when we see someone offering or volunteering to do a particularly nasty, uncomfortable or dangerous job? How do we feel when we realise that Jesus was not obliged or forced to go to the cross for us, that God must have allowed Jesus a free choice?
- Try to compare verse 11 with verse 12 (Old Covenant versus New).
- What aspects of the New Covenant are shown in these verses to be superior to their counterparts in the Old Covenant?
- What does the Jer 31:33 quote describe for those under the New Covenant?
- Take some time to pray about how amazing and complete the New Covenant that we are living under is.

Further Notes

Compare 10:1 (NIV “the good things that are coming”) and 9.11 (NIV “good things that are now already here”). Christians have some benefits of being saved right now, but some benefits when they die. Verse 4: The writer finally lays it out: it is impossible for animal sacrifices to take away human sins. It has taken the writer several chapters of reasoning to reach this point. But now, there’s no more cotton wool to cushion the blow. Those Christians drawn to the old ways of Judaism get the clear challenge – Judaism is a total waste of time and that challenge will get much more intense later in chapter 10. “World” verse 5: this is the physical world that we live in, not the heavenly world of verse 2.5. The quote from Ps 40 is from the Greek Old Testament, which differs from the

Hebrew Old Testament we have access to today. The meaning of the Psalm and other OT passages that talk about the futility of sacrifices is that sacrifice without an obedient heart are useless. The Hebrews writer in verse 9 contrasts the first part (about the futility of animal sacrifices) with the second part (about the effectiveness of a willing sacrifice). This is to prove to the readers that the Old Covenant was always destined to be replaced. The quote from Jer 31 is to focus on the final statement “their sins ... I will remember no more”, to show that once Jesus had died, no further sacrifices were needed. This is the final summary of the doctrine of Hebrews: Jesus’ sacrifice has made believers fit to worship God because He has made them holy (10), perfect (14) and forgiven (18). The Old Covenant could never do this.

Hebrews 10:19-11:40 — A Better Way

The writer has talked about the better revelation, the better prophet, the better priest and the better covenant. So, after describing in detail the meaning of Jesus’ priesthood and sacrifice (8:1-10:19), he turns to exhorting the congregation to faith and perseverance, and to an extended series of examples of how faith endures through hope in God.

10:19-39 serves as a summary of the preceding sections and as an announcement of developments to come in the remainder of his sermon/letter. It contains recognisable echos of earlier units, see ch 6 and also ch 2:1-4. The triad of Christian qualities alluded to in 10:22-25 are further developed in the rest of the sermon: faith 11:1-40, hope through perseverance in 12:1-13 and love in 12:14-13:21.

Heb 10:19-25

Thu 3 Nov

The author points out two benefits for Christians from Jesus’ death and exaltation: authorisation for access to the heavenly sanctuary, and a great priest in charge of God’s household. Based on this, he appeals to them to draw near to God, hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, and continue to spur one another on.

Questions of the Text

- Looking back if need be at chapters 8:1 – 10:18, how is it Christians now have confidence to enter the holy places? Why did the author describe this as a “new”, and “living”, way?
- Why do you think the author had to write about the benefits that come from the sacrifice of Jesus, and appeal to the community to act responsibility and commitment? What do you think that community was like?

Questions for Us

- What helps you draw near to God? What hinders you drawing near to God?
- We are told to be unswerving in hope; is there anything that pulls you away?
- Consider how you can help one (or more) other disciple(s) to grow in love and good deeds, and act on it.
- If you are not attending meetings of the body on a regular basis, consider why this is, and discuss with other disciples.

Further Notes

10:22 – See Jeremiah 31:33, referring to a new heart being created in God’s people. See also Hebrews 9:18-22, referring to Moses sprinkling blood at the ratification of the Sinai covenant.

10:24-5 – The writer encourages the Hebrews to continue to care for one another – through love, good works and mutual encouragement. This congregation appears to have been known for this, in their past (see 6:10, 10:33-34). It appears that this congregation was in a situation of testing and disappointment; what they appear to have needed was a communal setting of mutual encouragement

and admonition. Verse 3:13 appears to contemplate a daily gathering of the house church, with the entire community assuming responsibility for one another.

Why had some stopped meeting together? - possibilities include fear of recognition by outsiders in a time of persecution, disappointment in the delay of the “second coming” of Christ, some other concern, or preoccupation of business affairs. However, the writer regards their failure to meet together as threatening the life of the congregation and as a prelude to apostasy on the part of those not attending. See also the reference at 10:25 to the Day of the Lord approaching, which provides a further incentive for the individuals concerned to change their ways.

Heb 10:26-31

Fri 4 Nov

This paragraph is a severe warning about the danger of apostasy, with emphasis on the divine punishment apostasy deserves. See also 6:4-8 which envisions a process of apostasy.

Questions of the Text

- According to the writer, what happens to those who “go on sinning deliberately”, after they have received knowledge of the truth?
- Who is the judge of those who sin? Can Christians judge one another?
- Does it appear from this passage that the doctrine of “once saved, always saved” can be correct?

Questions for Us

- What is deliberate sin, and why is it significant? What do you think could fall into this category – e.g. missing meetings of the body; lust, what if someone is consistently deceitful?
- What do you think “go on sinning...” implies – a few isolated incidents, a pattern of behaviour?
- Consider Luke 17:3-4 and Matt 18:22. What do these show about intention, repentance and forgiveness?
- Look at James 5:19-20: it is very clear that a disciple may wander from the truth and yet be brought back – the disciples are effectively directed to try and bring back the strays. How do you reconcile this Scripture with Hebrews 10:26-31?

Further Notes

The key expression is “if we deliberately persist in sin”. Sin is defilement: open, intentional and voluntary apostasy. The Jewish reader would have been familiar with Numbers 15:22-31, where a distinction is made between unintentional and deliberate sin. Deliberate sin indicated that the individual despised the word of God; no sacrifice was available to cover such sin, and the person would be cut off from God’s people.

Three clauses in v29 provide definition for “if we deliberately persist in sin”: “trampled upon the Son of God” – amounting to a scornful rejection of Jesus “treated the blood of the covenant... as defiled” – ie deliberately rejecting the power of Christ’s blood to purge sins “insulted the Spirit of grace”. Rejecting the truth of the Spirit is evil. This intentional sin takes place after reception of “full knowledge of the truth” – that is, acceptance of life in response to the preaching of the gospel, and based on a clear perception of the truth.

One question that arises from reading this passage is whether all “deliberate sin”, or “deliberately persist[ing] in sin”, amounts to the behaviour set out in v29. Different views have been taken of this passage over the years – and over the centuries - and it must be admitted it is a difficult one. When considering this question, however, we should bear in mind God’s grace and the great themes of repentance and forgiveness that run throughout the Bible. We would, tentatively, suggest that apostasy has to be intentional – that is, a person has to consciously reject Jesus and the power of his

sacrifice and the power of the Holy Spirit. Where a person does that, since the Bible teaches there is no further sacrifice for sins, the foundation of further repentance and forgiveness has then been removed. We would also suggest that while it is indeed possible (see James 5:19) for Christians to wander from the truth and then return, it is also entirely possible for a Christian to wander so far that apostasy then results.

Heb 10:32-39

Mon 7 Nov

This section, following a sharp warning, comprises words of encouragement, based on the church's past experiences. (See a similar pattern in 6:4-12.)

Questions of the Text

- How is it that those addressed in this letter had been able, in the past, to accept sufferings and losses? What does this tell us about them?
- Is their past effort going to be sufficient for the community to receive the reward?
- What do you think is implied by “shrinks back”? What is its result?
- What, do you think, is the writer's overall view of the community? (See v 39.)

Questions for Us

- The Hebrews addressed in the letter had endured with great faith through past sufferings and losses. Why do you think they were (apparently) finding it hard to do so this time round?
- Are you able to relate easily to their particular experiences (so far as we can identify them – which is a bit difficult with lack of historical information)?
- How, then, can we use their experiences as instructive for us?
- Can you identify with “shrinking back”, or withdrawing, to any extent? Why is this a dangerous thing to do?

Further Notes

The writer indicates that the church community addressed here had, in the past, endured a contest with sufferings, some experiencing verbal and physical abuse and imprisonment, with the others showing solidarity with them. This may well have been around AD49 when Claudius evicted the Jews from Rome for rioting (disturbances between Jews and Christians) over a certain “Chrestus” (Christ?) - see also Acts 18:1-2. If the writing of the letter is AD 63/64 then 15 years would have passed between the persecutions and the issues being addressed by the author.

Perseverance/ endurance is clearly seen as necessary to receive the promise – which is the blessing of full salvation; see also 6:12.

“For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.”

In this citation (v37-8), the writer of Hebrews refers to two scriptures, Isaiah 26:20 and Habakkuk 2:3-4. The “Song of Isaiah”, Isaiah 26:9-20, was used in the prayers of the early church and of the synagogue; it is a passage counselling withdrawal and concealment for a little while until the wrath of God has passed. By referring very briefly to this, the writer perhaps shows that he knew of some of the Christians wanting to withdraw and be concealed, in this time of difficulty and persecution. However, the rest of the citation from Habakkuk shows he does not agree with that approach. Essentially, the writer uses the citation from Habakkuk to emphasise that the faithful one must not draw back, but must demonstrate faithfulness through hardship and sufferings. He wishes to strongly encourage the church to endure and to remain faithful.

Hebrews 11

This section elaborates on the qualities of faith; see also 10:36, 10:39. Faith is the first of the triad of Christian qualities referred to at 10:22-25. It addresses the specific nature of faith, as shown in the biblical record, and also shows the relationship of faith to martyrdom; individuals mentioned exercised faith in the face of death. This particularly responds to the need of the community addressed by the writer.

The writer adds his own comments, between the setting out of particular traditional examples, esp at vs 1-2, 6, 10, 13-16, 39-40 - where he underlines the forward-looking character of faith, i.e. a steadfast trust in God and his promises.

Note: to formally educated people at this time, “faith” was “regarded as a state of mind characteristic of the uneducated, who believe something on hearsay without being able to give precise reasons for their belief” (WL p316). The willingness of Christians/ Jews to suffer for the undemonstrable was astonishing to pagan observers.

Heb 11:1-3

Tue 8 Nov

Faith is a quality of response to God that celebrates the reality of promised blessings and the objective certainty of events announced but yet unseen. Faith is focused on the future. Faith demonstrates the existence of a substantial reality – it furnishes evidence. It has its source in a direct personal encounter with the living God. Because of the quality of this faith, individuals can go forward into an uncertain future with courage, supported by trust in a reliable God.

Questions of the Text

- Why do you think the men of the past received attestation from God for their faith? How was their faith demonstrated?
- Why does the writer refer to creation as an example of faith?
- Compare several different translations of Hebrews 11:1. What differences do you notice, and does this help increase your overall understanding?

Questions for Us

- How is your faith? Would people describe you as someone who trusts in God. How do you respond when in a situation of stress or burden or challenge? How devoted are you to reading the word of God, meditating on the word, and acting on the word?
- What helps you trust that God has your best interests at heart?
- Does the pagan criticism of “faith” (i.e. that it’s based on hearsay, without being able to give precise reasons for belief) have any relevance in our world today? If so then how, as Christians, can we defeat this criticism?

Heb 11:4-7

Wed 9 Nov

This is the start of a series of illustrations of people who responded in faith to God, before the time of Christ. In today’s section we deal with Abel, Enoch and Noah.

Questions

- Abel: read Genesis 4:3-5a. Why do you think Abel’s gift was more acceptable? Review Genesis 4:7 re Cain.
- In the traditional literature, Enoch is used as a model of repentance. But what does the writer of Hebrews emphasise about Enoch?

- Why, do you think, the writer says that without faith it is impossible to please God? What is required (v6) of a person wanting to approach God?
- Thinking about Noah and his actions, how much does your faith give a substantial reality to the promises of God about your future? Is this reality shown in how you live your life?

Further Notes

There is not enough detail in the Biblical account to be certain why Abel's gift was more acceptable. There are various traditions (pre the time of Christ) that look at the content, and/ or the manner, of Abel and Cain's respective sacrifices. Note that Abel is referred to as speaking "by his faith" (Gen 4:4) – not by his blood (Gen 4:10) – i.e. by God's approval of his integrity and sacrifice.

Enoch, like Abel, is mentioned for the quality of his response to God at a time before the written word, the spoken word (e.g. to Noah) and the promise (given to Abraham and his descendants). He was popular figure in hellenistic-Jewish literature in the centuries before Jesus. In the traditional literature, Enoch is cited as a model of repentance (i.e. see Genesis 5:19-24; after he had his son Methuselah when he was 65, he walked with God). However, the writer of Hebrews chooses to speak from the point of view of faith; Enoch's faith was fundamental to his being pleasing to God.

Noah is the first witness mentioned here whose faith signified obedient response to the Word of God – he was (see 11:1 again) instructed by God about events as yet unseen. Noah paid attention to God's instruction; his faith gave a substantial reality to the events God had described to him; he did not hesitate to act as though they were already happening. He fully trusted God that they would be saved; he also endured the scorn of his contemporaries, while building the Ark. There is a tradition that Noah was a righteous person – see Gen 7:1, Ezek 14:14, 20.

Heb 11:8-12, 17-22

Thu 10 Nov

Abraham has the most space devoted to him, out of the examples of faith.

Questions of the Text

- Why do you think the writer devoted the most attention to Abraham, of all the examples of faithful men and women? Does this tell you something about his audience?
- What do we learn here about Abraham's faith? What were his actions that evidenced his faith?
- Abraham was obedient in responding to the call to go to an unknown land. Does it appear that he expected to permanently settle there, at that time? If not, why not?

Questions for Us

- Abraham had a very specific call and instructions from God. How does this compare to our situation as Christians?
- Often we are called to obey God contrary to our feelings/ desires/ understanding. What areas of your life do you find difficult to surrender to God in this way?
- How do you view God's promises to you? What do you tend to seek first – God's kingdom, or having your needs met?

Further Notes

There is emphasis on Abraham's obedience to God's call and the immediateness of his response. A correlation between faith and obedience is deliberately drawn here (see also ch 5:8-9)

Note that God's call is directed to an inheritance.

Abraham went trustingly into the unknown, not knowing where he was going – called to go a land that he would be shown. (Gen 12:1) vs 9-10 A theme of being a stranger and a foreigner is introduced here. Abraham and descendants lived in tents – refusal to establish a permanent settlement. Canaan was not the ultimate promised inheritance; Abraham had a firm expectation of God’s city, the “city with foundations” – a fixed metaphor for God’s kingdom, God’s reign.

v11-12 – another illustration of Abraham’s active faith – fathering of a child in his old age. The emphasis is on the utter reliability of God, who had made the promise (Heb 6:13, 10:23, 11:11 and 12:26 for use of the verb “to promise” – all by God). The consequence of Abraham’s faith is shown in v12 – fulfilment of the promise. (See also Gen 15:5, 22:17, Exodus 32:13 showing his numerous descendants.)

V 17-19: the demand for Isaac’s sacrifice was a threat to the integrity of God’s promise (about Abraham’s descendants) as well as seeming to contradict the character of God and profound human affections. Abraham seems to have understood intuitively, however, that the obedience of faith required an allegiance to God surpassing even the most intimate of family ties. His trial of faith has a central place in Jewish tradition, as a model of faithfulness and obedience to God.

Heb 11:13-16

Fri 11 Nov

Abraham was looking forward to a spiritual place – he was content with some discomfort and uncertainty, e.g. living in tents, because he knew that a better place was ahead.

Questions

- In v 16, two reasons are given as to why “God is not ashamed to be their God”. What does this tell us about God, and about “them” – or, perhaps, about us?
- In what way, and to what extent, can we also consider ourselves “strangers and pilgrims”?
- Can you say that your focus and desire is primarily for the City of God, or are you distracted by the things of this age?

Further Notes

The promises given by God to Abraham – see Genesis 12:2-3 and 7 - would be fulfilled far ahead in the future. Abraham would not see their fulfilment during his natural lifetime.

Abraham and his immediate family remained strangers in the land until their death – but they could see fulfilment from a distance, by faith. Their natural deaths did not call in to question the validity of the promise. What is more, they did not reach their destination by death. If they had, then the writer would have said that they had attained the goal.

Their real homeland is the city which has foundations – v10 – and the “better country” of v16. They are not travelling towards it, not migrating to it during their lifetime; they are waiting for it to appear later. Abraham and his family were pilgrims, but they seemed to have no thought of returning to where they had come from, either. They were oriented by faith towards the city which is to come.

Heb 11:23-31

Mon 14 Nov

The writer moves on to examples of faith predominantly from Moses’ life, also Joshua and Rahab, i.e. the time prior to entry to the Promised Land. (For Rahab as an example of faith by good works, see also James 2:25, and 1 Clement 12 from the writings of the church fathers.)

Questions

- What motivated Moses? See v26.
- Throughout this section, we can see an emphasis on overcoming fear and acting on the basis of faith. Why do you think the writer has given this particular emphasis? (Think about who he was writing to, and what their situation was.)
- What are some of your common fears? In situations that are frightening for you, what helps you – or what would help you – to best respond in faith?

Further Notes

Moses is described as “uncommonly striking” - traditionally interpreted to mean that they believed Moses enjoyed God’s favour and protection. Both Moses’ parents and the Hebrew midwives risked their own lives (see Exodus 1:17-21).

Moses’ departure from Egypt: this probably refers to Exodus 2:14-15, rather than the Exodus. V28 refers to the Passover, which logically should be mentioned before the Exodus. Also, during the Exodus, Pharaoh urged the Hebrews to leave, so his rage is not relevant there.

V29: the Hebrews also shared the faith of Moses in a terrifying situation, the crossing of the Red Sea. Joshua, and Rahab, were also ready to act through faith in very frightening situations. Note that their faith was oriented to the future – e.g. Rahab was prepared to go through danger for the sake of future preservation.

Heb 11:32-40

Tue 15 Nov

Questions of the Text

- Look at v 32; check back in your Bible where necessary, for details about these six men. (Some references are included in Notes below)
- Why do you think the list of these six men seems fairly random, and is not in chronological order?
- Vs 33-35a refer back to OT and Jewish history; see if you can think of some of the persons to whom the writer may be referring.
- Overall, these nine verses include very brief reference to a lot of incidents in the history of God’s people. Think about the congregation he was writing to - what does the writer’s approach tell you about them? And what do you think he might be trying to achieve, with this approach?
- If these men and women all were commended for their faith, why did they not receive what was promised?
- Bearing that in mind, what do you think the writer of Hebrews was trying to say to the original readers of his letter?

Questions for Us

- We live in a very different society and, for most of us, the threat of death for our faith may seem relatively remote. How do we view our struggles and difficulties in comparison?
- At times of suffering, how can we apply this section to help us in our faith?

Further Notes

Gideon (Judges 6:33-8:21); Barak (Judges 4:4-16); Samson (Judges 15:18-19); Jephthah (Judges 10:6 – 11:32); David (e.g. 1 Samuel 17); Samuel (eg 1 Samuel 7:5-14, 1 Samuel 12:3-5). The prophets were also examples of faith to their own generation.

Verses 33-35a are a summary of the achievements of faith, which presupposes quite a detailed knowledge of Old Testament and subsequent Jewish history. v35b-36 is a frank acknowledgement that invincible faith did not make them immune from persecution, humiliation and violent death. For example, Jeremiah was ridiculed (Jer 20:2, 7-8), imprisoned (Jer 37:15-16, 18-20), thrown into a cistern (Jer 38:6-13); some prophets were murdered by the sword (eg 1 Kings 18:4, 13; 19:10). Moreover, in the intertestamental period – quite recent history, for the recipients of Hebrews - 2 Maccabees 6:18 – 7:42 recounts the martyrdoms of Eleazar, a scribe, and a mother with her 7 sons at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his officers; they refused to be released, so as to gain a better resurrection.

These people were commended for their faith, but the final reward was delayed until the advent of Christ and the advent of the new covenant. They would reach perfection together with us; Christ has accomplished his ministry, so they will share in its blessings with us. The message for the Hebrews is that their privileged status as Christians should motivate them to be willing, and equipped, to endure the testing of their faith.

Hebrews 12 – 13

In this section of the letter the writer now moves to a more instructional way of living. No doubt there are passages in the chapters that still require some OT background, and this will be needed to have a greater understanding of the text. So far we find that the Hebrew writer has been persuading second generation Christians not to turn their backs on Jesus and Christianity in favour of Judaism. He argued how Jesus is more superior to the angels, Moses and Joshua, and all the Jewish high priests in succession. He compared going back to Judaism like the Israelites going back to Egypt without faith and in deliberate disobedience. He shows how Jesus has a more superior order of priesthood, and is the mediator of a better covenant. He explains that by Jesus offering himself, Jesus offers a better sacrifice than the OT ones with a more superior heavenly tabernacle. He then calls the readers to persevere and to remember OT men of faith as examples who died in faith even though they had not received the promises, although only with the NT saints would they share the same inheritance.

This brings us to the beginning of chapter 12. In this section I will include some questions to help us think about the passages. In this final section, while faith is the underlying theme, faith is now being dealt with as it is lived out in endurance and submission to discipline.

Heb 12:1-3

Wed 16 Nov

The writer appealed to his readers to run with endurance, as Jesus own endurance was hostile opposition. Even given all the OT witnesses as examples of faith, Jesus example of faith was crucial for them to respond.

Questions

- Is the emphasis on what the Christians see in the witnesses, or the other way round? Do their examples inspire heroic discipleship?
- Why do you think the writer uses the witnesses as a motivation to run the race of perseverance while throwing off every hindrance?
- Why would the writer call the readers to fix their eyes on Jesus? What do you think the readers fixed their eyes on? How does this fit with the metaphor of the race?

- How can we apply this passage to ourselves today?

Further Notes

Ancient footraces were very popular in Olympic games of that time. In an oblong stadium there would be raised tiers either side where spectators or witnesses would sit. At one end of the stadium would be the entrance marked as a starting point for the racers. At the opposite end there would be a judge holding the prize which the competitors focussed their eyes on. The track was marked out by square pillars. Competitors usually trained vigorously shedding off excess body weight that could hinder their performance, and they usually ran unclothed to avoid entanglement. The writer used this event as a spiritual metaphor to encourage the readers to run with endurance towards Jesus. Jesus is described as the “Author and perfecter of our faith”. He is the pioneer/founder of a working faith which only he brought to completion with his life and death.

Heb 12:4-13

Thu 17 Nov

Proverbs 3:12 citation brings together the concepts of discipline and sonship. These Jewish Christians had not yet experienced bloody martyrdom for their faith, unlike their OT predecessors mentioned in the chapter before, yet they had forgotten the word of encouragement cited from Proverbs 3:12. What does Gods discipline tell us about their (our) relationship to Him, and about Gods perspective and purposes for us? The writer uses an illustration of sons being disciplined by their earthly fathers to show us Gods discipline over his children. Now the word “discipline” (paideuo) generally means “to train a child” but it does combine nuances of training, instruction, firm guidance with reproof, correction and punishment.

Questions

- What would be considered the discipline of God in your life, and do you acknowledge Gods love when you are disciplined?
- How does this compare the discipline of your parents growing up?
- What are the similarities between parental discipline and Gods discipline?
- What are the limitations of parental discipline compared to Gods discipline?
- Do you think suffering becomes disciplinary when God makes suffering a means to mature his children? Would this include all suffering?

The writer rounds off this section by citing Isa 35:3 and Prov4:26 to further emphasise the athletic race metaphor.

Heb 12:14-17

Fri 18 Nov

From here on, the letter turns to practical instruction.

Questions

- What do you think is meant by “pursue peace” and why do you think this is closely linked with pursuing holiness?
- The writer opens this section by exhorting his readers to live in peace with all men; but what does that mean? Does this mean peace at all costs while compromising on righteousness and ignoring boundaries of Godly conviction? The writer implies a link between living in peace and being holy. The writer may have had Psalm 34:14 in mind which cites “turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it”. In order to seek peace we need to turn from evil,

replacing evil with good. How can this be done at church, at home, at work, and with our extended family and friends?

- The readers would have found it easier to perform holy rituals if they were to return to Judaism and its sacrificial system. Gods calling however was to be holy (Lev 11:44-45). Personal holiness involves being separate/ set apart from the world, just like God was training His son Israel to be separate from its world Egypt. What holy rituals can we perform that do not require personal holiness? What has a stronger grip on our lives – the worlds values or Gods? Yes, the blood of Jesus sanctifies us (makes us holy – the same Greek root word) 1Cor 6:11, but without personal righteousness and holiness in our lives we could still lose our salvation. How can unholiness breed?
- Bitterness can fester and affect others as well as yourself. In Deut 29:18 a bitter root that produces a poison is used as a metaphor to describe how the heart can turn away from the Lord. Can you see a relationship between bitter roots that grow in peoples hearts and apostasy if the roots are left unchecked?
- What is your standard on sexual purity in both thought and deed? Is it the worlds standard, your own personal standard or Gods standard? Like Esau are you willing to readily throw away your expensive inheritance for moments of cheap worldly pleasure?

Esau was described as sexually immoral and profane/godless, even though Genesis does not explicitly describe him as such. Implicitly he was immoral and godless since he married Hittite women (Gen 26:34-35) and hence would have been ensnared by Hittite religion and culture (some of which may have included ritual or cult prostitution). He also despised his God given birthright. These were behaviours reflecting his apostate heart.

Heb 12:18-24

Mon 21 Nov

The rest of this chapter summarises the previous themes; there was a distance from God under the old covenant; God can be approached with unrestricted access under the new covenant; God has spoken and continues to speak, so that close attention to what He says is an urgent concern.

Questions

- What two things are compared in this passage? (see also Exod19:16-22)
- List 7 characteristics of the first event and 7 of the second, and compare.
- Compare what the passage says about the mediators of the 2 covenants.

Further Notes

The “city of God” is a recurrent Biblical theme used in historical and apocalyptic perspective. (Psa 48:8, 87:1-7, Isa 28:16) The writer draws the readers attention to the physical mountain (Mount Sinai) in Exodus 19, which no Israelite or animal was to touch much less transcend up it. The penalty was death. Not even Moses and Aaron could go up till after the loud trumpet blast. Everyone else was to be consecrated and to wait at the foot of the mountain. Limits were set around the mountain because it was set apart as holy. That day when God came down Mount Sinai was a terrifying day for all who witnessed this. The readers being Jews recognised this Mosaic theme, but were called to a more superior mountain; not the physical temple mount in Jerusalem that has not yet been destroyed. The writer was pointing to a spiritual heavenly mountain. The concept of the mountain in OT when used in apocalyptic writing is usually connected with kingdoms or empires, physical or spiritual (Dan2, Isaiah2, Micah4). In the new covenant the mountain (city of the living God) is accessible to all the saints. Who is on this mountain? – a multitude of angels, the church of saints, God, OT righteous men (and women) made perfect, Jesus. The church is not the mountain of God (or the kingdom), but the mountain of God (kingdom) includes the church.

Heb 12:25-29

Tue 22 Nov

These verses provide another sharp warning to the community.

Questions

- If the new covenant speaks a better word in Christ than the old covenant, then how should the readers have responded to Him who speaks.?
- How were the people that did not escape wrath when they refused the warning on earth, and who warned them? Think of the desert wanderings!
- Who do you think warned from earth and from heaven? Which warning do you think carries greater responsibility and danger for the hearers?
- In OT God shook the earth but warned through Haggai (2:6-9) that both the heavens and earth would be shaken in the future. The writer could have applied this citation to allude primarily to the destruction and removal of all created things including the temple and its sacrificial system. But what remains is what cannot be destroyed in heaven and on earth, and that is spiritual – Gods kingdom. The “shaking of heaven and earth” was often used in the OT as a metaphor for the judgement of God executed in history (Isa 13:13, Judges 5:4-5, Joel 2:10). In Haggais day 520BC they had just finished the foundation of the second temple which was physically inferior to the first one (Solomons temple 959-586BC). Haggais prophecy is one of hope that even after God has effected judgement, nations will come and the temple will be filled with glory. This can only be pointing to the spiritual temple of the new covenant. What cannot be shaken, and why? (see Dan 2:44; 7:27)
- What do you think would be included by “worship God acceptably”?
- The writer calls his readers to receive Gods kingdom with thanksgiving and reverence. What do we hold on to that can easily be shaken and removed.?

Heb 13:1-6

Wed 23 Nov

“Brotherly love” is a term which in ordinary usage was restricted to actual siblings in a household. Christians treating one another as family members was something unusual and exceptional in the society of that time. In practice, itinerant teachers, missionaries, refugees from persecution or prison relied on a network of Christian homes. Our hospitality may be on a different scale and in a different manner today. Do we focus on just those we know well or those who are our closest friends, or perhaps those who are similar to us?

The Hebrew writer concludes his letter by reminding his readers not to neglect practising Christian love for one another, a theme of brotherly love seen in the rest of the NT. Perhaps in the pursuit to return to comfortable religion the Jewish Christians forgot to look out for each other. From Jesus to Peter, the message for Christians to love each other deeply is never understated, and is the hallmark of a disciple (John 13:34-35, Rom 12:10, 1Thess 4:9-10, 1Peter 4:8).

Questions

- Generally, the instructions given in chapters 12 and 13 are brief. Do you think these instructions are specific to the original audience, or of general application?
- Why do you think that God always reminds us to love?
- Are we selective about who we love in fellowship?
- The writer broadens the theme of love by encouraging them to show hospitality to all (like Abraham did – Gen 18:1-5) and remembering those in prison (Timothy who was known by the readers was just released from prison). It is probable that the Christians did not keep in touch with others who were out of sight but suffering for the faith. Who do we often remember in our prayers?

- Whether we entertain angels unknowingly or not, do we only practice hospitality with people we know very well (friends and family)?
- In 12:16 the writer had previously stressed the importance of sexual purity as an integral part of being holy. Here he expands the point in the context of the holiness of marriage. But why mention the need for Jewish Christians to honour the marriage bed and keep it pure? Certainly amongst Jews particularly of Hillel's popular rabbinical teaching there was sexual laxity in cases of divorce and remarriage for any reason, even the lustful look and fantasy – all this was addressed by Jesus' sermon on the mount (Matt 5:28-29, 19:1-9). The pagans were even more prevalent to be promiscuous to the point that it was normal in society (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Thess 4:3-5, Gal 5:19). The Jewish Christians considering returning to Judaism would be concerned about not defiling the Jewish temple. God is concerned about our temples (our bodies) not being defiled, and warns us to flee sexual sin – 1 Cor 6:18-19. How well do you resist the world and media culture that teaches the normality of sexual diversity? How have you kept your purity – whether single or married? Do you struggle with a hidden dark secret that Satan tells you not to expose and deal with? Make no mistake – God is not just a cuddly teddy bear of grace, love and forgiveness. He is a God of repentance too as well as the final judge. He will judge this unrepentant lifestyle.
- Like many of the Pharisees and Sadducees who were wealthy political aristocrats whom Jesus denounced for their love of money (Luke 16:14), Jews generally aspired to have material prosperity. The Jewish Christians were warned against such greed and materialism. In the affluent world we live in, are we content with what we have or do we always want more without satisfaction? Often we cling to money and our jobs for survival and forget God. The writer has to remind the readers that God would not forsake them and that He is the helper. What can man do to you? (Psalm 118:6-7) The thanksgiving Psalm 118:6 is cited here to encourage the community to affirm their trust in God.

Heb 13:7-17

Thu 24 Nov

The writer makes very clear that the church had leaders whom the church were to respect and imitate. The use of the word “remember” in the present tense, the use of “leaders” v7,17,24 (literally “those who rule over you” in the present participle) would suggest that their leaders are still alive and present. They are more likely to be appointed leaders since many of the apostolic generation would have died. It is interesting that the writer does not include himself as part of their leadership.

Their faith should be imitated. It is their faith that is based on the unchangeable nature of their preaching about Christ. Hence Christ is the same for always as should be the foundational preaching and Godly lifestyle. Strange doctrine was now threatening the community, especially over ceremonial meals connected with the Jewish covenant.

Questions

- What qualities in the life of a leader can call us to imitate their faith?
- Do we remember those who have taught us – and do we imitate their faith? How can we do this?
- Are our convictions still based on the teaching that we originally received about Jesus, or have they shifted?

Further Notes

If Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, then his teachings would be consistent for all time. The warning not to be carried away by strange teachings may be connected with the Jewish ceremonial regulations; the Jewish ritual foods were of no value. By contrast, we have a Christian altar upon which we sacrifice. This sacrifice is more superior to the Jewish temple sacrifices. Those who serve at the tabernacle/tent symbolise those outside the new covenant have no right to eat. It

is on this Christian altar that the Jewish Christians are called to offer sacrifices of praise to God (the fruit of the lips of confession). The sacrifice that is more pleasing to God is the heart of benevolence.

As part of Judaism, the dead body of the sin offering during the day of Atonement – Lev 16 (or the red heifer sacrifice – Num 19) was disposed of and burned outside the camp. The animal bodies burnt outside the camp and Jesus suffering outside the city gate share one common theme; the symbolic removal of sin from the camp. Jesus suffered outside the city to make the people holy. Furthermore, Jesus was officially condemned for blasphemy (Mark 14:63-64), and the law required the execution of such outside the camp (Lev 24:11,16) – Jesus was made an outcast. Following Jesus outside the camp meant enduring his suffering and shame, cutting off social and emotional ties with the Jewish community and its old framework.

The writer concludes his remarks by reminding them of the blood of the “eternal” covenant in Christ the great Shepherd who equips the Christians for everything good to do his will (cf 2Tim 3:17). Returning to the ceremonial worship of the temple would not equip them in all things.

Do you need anything extra for Christ to work in you?