

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

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This outline with commentary is designed to help you read Hebrews with understanding. (See also my Hebrews course at www.kingdominbible.com.) By no means should it take the place of repeatedly and actively reading that book. Above all, make sure God's Word changes your life and not just your mental understanding.

The main parts of the outline (see the end) are in part from Stanley D. Toussaint. Most Bible quotations are from the New International Version, sometimes with added bolding. As John 1:41 authorizes, Messiah replaces Christ, to show that this title means rulership.

Prologue (Theme), 1:1-4

This is one long sentence in Greek. Its main elements give the theme of the book:

“God...has spoken...by his Son.”

God had given bits of revelation on various occasions through the prophets. But unlike those bits, this final revelation by the Son is complete. All the Book of Hebrews is about the Son and our response to Him. The Prologue begins by describing Him as

a,b	God's heir and creator of all	(His relationship to creation)
c,d	God's glory and image	(His relationship to God)
e,f	the mover of history ¹ and purger of sins	(His relationship to history)
g	the victor ready to rule.	

After the Prologue Hebrews has two main divisions: Part I (1:4 through 10:18) is mainly doctrinal, and Part II (10:19 through 13:17) is mainly “practical.” We will call Part I “The Superiority of the Son” and Part II “Our Response, Persevering Faith.” Part I exalts the Son in detail. It compares Him² to the following agents of the covenant God had made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai:

- Angels, the spirit agents (1:4 to 2:18)
- Moses, the great prophet (or “apostle,” 3:1 to 4:13)
- Aaron, the high priest (4:14 to 10:18), in much detail

Each of these comparisons has two sides: Jesus is better in His person and better in His work. Also in each comparison, there is a major warning not to reject the Son and return to the old covenant.³ Let each paragraph strengthen your own resolve to follow God's Son.

¹ The Greek word for “sustaining” in 1:3 usually has an active thought, not passive. For example, it is used of the wind driving a ship in Acts 27:15, 17.

² Since these comparisons primarily consider Him in His human aspects, Hebrews often calls Him by His human name *Jesus*.

³ Each warning seems to be more intense than the one before it. I have chosen titles starting with the letter *D*. Other titles may be equally valid or better.

I. The Superiority of the Son, 1:4 to 10:18

A. His superiority to angels, 1:4 to 2:18

1. Superior in His person, 1:4-14

See Chart A, which follows. In this section the writer uses seven quotations from the Old Testament, which I will call Q1, Q2, etc. These quotations prove that the Son is better in His person than the angels.⁴ One feature tying the quotations together is the question preceding the first and last of them: “To which of the angels did God ever say?” The middle quotation (Q4) describes the angels. The first three quotations show that the Son has a better name. The last three show that He has a better position. The time of Q3 is Messiah’s second coming.⁵ Guided by Chart A, read each of these quotations in Hebrews 1:4–14.

Chart A The Son Better than the Angels in His Person Hebrews 1:4–14						
The Son’s Better Name			The Angels	The Son’s Better Position		
“To which of the angels did God ever say?”				“To which of the angels did God ever say?”		
Q1 You are my Son; today I have become your Father (Heb. 1:5a)	Q2 I will be his Father, and he will be my Son (Heb. 1:5b)	Q3 Let all God’s angels worship him. (Heb. 1:6)	Q4 He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire. (Heb. 1:7)	Q5 Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever. . . .scepter of your kingdom....God... has set you above your companions.... (Heb. 1:8–9)	Q6 In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain.... (Heb. 1:10–12)	Q7 Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. (Heb. 1:13)

In Chart B you will find the Old Testament references for the same quotations. The Book of Hebrews quotes them from the Greek language version of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew language original. There are some differences. For example, the Hebrew original of Psalm 97:7 (Q3) has “gods” rather than “angels.” Apparently, the term *gods* includes *angels*.

⁴ In this section (1:4–14) angels are referred to specifically in verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, and 14. They are seen as spokesmen for the old covenant in 2:2 (cf. 12:18–19).

⁵ In the introduction to Q3 (1:6), the Greek adverb for “again” is with the verb. Thus, the NASB is probably correct: “And when He **again brings** the first-born into the world,” thus referring to the Second Coming.

companions] salvation [that is, His kingdom].” This future and complete aspect of “salvation” is its meaning throughout this book.⁶

It is important to notice that in this passage our Lord’s title *Son* does not indicate His deity but His exalted humanity. It is not eternal but a “name **he has inherited**” (1:4). The Greek verb always refers to something acquired; He **became** the Son as a man. Does that imply that He was not divine before He came to earth? Of course not. But becoming Son means that as a man He became God’s Heir and designated Ruler.⁷ This meaning is reflected both in the wording and the Old Testament contexts of the first two quotations: “**I have become your Father**” (1:5a) and “**I will be his Father and he will be my Son**” (1:5b).

2. The danger of drifting, 2:1-4

First Main Warning

We must pay attention to what the Son has said. Those who drift away from it will be severely punished. Consider (a) the greatness of the salvation He promises and (b) God’s miracles confirming His message.

When God established the first covenant, He often spoke through angels (Acts 7:38, 53). Those who disobeyed were punished. The Son’s message, however, is far more important. Those who drift away from it (like an unsecured boat) will receive more severe punishment. What did the Son talk about? “A great salvation.” The Gospel accounts identify this as God’s kingdom, which drew near at His first coming (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). Jesus later revealed that He will establish that kingdom when He returns (Matt. 16:27–28; 25:34).⁸

God did miracles to confirm the message.. Observe at what times He did them: (a) when the Lord Jesus preached and (b) when “those who heard him” (the apostles) preached. In Hebrews 6:5, using the same Greek word, these miracles are called “**powers of the coming age.**” Such powers will establish and sustain the future kingdom. It seems significant that in 2:3–4 the writer looks at these confirmations as past. Apparently, they did not continue.

⁶ See, for example, 2:10 and 9:28. Salvation is also spoken of as future in many other books. For examples, see Isaiah 12:2, 3; Romans 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; and cross references.

⁷ This is the meaning of His sonship in such important passages as Matthew 16:16 and John 1:49. See my writings on those books.

⁸ In Matthew 16:27–28 He promised that some of those standing there would “see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” This referred to the Transfiguration, as Peter explained in 2 Peter 1:16–18. But the Transfiguration was only a foretaste of the kingdom in miniature. The kingdom itself was still future when Peter wrote (1:11). See my study of Matthew.

3. Superior in His work, 2:5-18

Hebrews now contrasts the Son to the angels in regard to their work.⁹ The Son will provide full salvation for many sons of God. As noted above, the word *salvation*, already used in 1:14 and 2:3, always refers to the future in Hebrews. Here the writer emphasizes that meaning: “the world [inhabited earth] to come, **about which we are speaking**” (2:5).

a. Man’s destiny, the glory of the world to come, 2:5–8

The writer begins this contrast by giving scriptural proof that God will eventually glorify mankind above angels. He cites Psalm 8, which pictures a world of “glory” for man. It magnifies God’s plans, first stated in Genesis 1:26–28, to put man in charge of everything.¹⁰ Since those plans are still unfulfilled, they require “the world to come.” (The next section shows that Jesus will lead “many sons” to that glory and rule, 2:10.) As noted before, the final destiny of redeemed mankind is not heaven in heaven but heaven on earth.¹¹ A great number of prophecies promise that earth will be renewed (see Isa. 11:6–9; 35:1–10; Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:21).

b. Man’s Deliverer, suffered with His brethren, 2:9–16

This is one of the few passages that explain why Jesus the appointed Heir (the Son) had to suffer. He did so not from weakness but from love. His suffering will enable others to join Him in the coming triumph just described. Only by death could He free us from the devil’s grip and give us the promised glory. This He did not for angels but for those who by faith are “Abraham’s descendants.”

c. Summary, 2:17–18

He truly became man (which He still is) and was truly tempted. Therefore, He can understand our trials and can lead us all the way.

B. His superiority to Moses, 3:1 to 4:13

Verse 1 of chapter 3 introduces the next two comparisons: “the apostle and high priest whom we confess.” The addressees, who confess Jesus, are “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling.” Yet, it becomes apparent that some are at risk of leaving this special group to which they were called.¹²

⁹ Angels are referred to at key points in 2:5–18 (vv. 5, 9, and 16). After this, only at 12:22 and 13:12.

¹⁰ In Psalm 8 originally and as quoted in Hebrews 2, “man” and “son of man” mean mankind in general. (See the same two terms with the same meaning in Psalm 144:3.) They do not refer to Jesus specifically but as a member of the human race.

¹¹ “The world to come” clearly refers to the earth. See how the Greek term here translated “world” is used, for example, in Matthew 24:14; Luke 2:1; 4:5; Acts 11:28; 17:6; Revelation 3:10.

¹² Partly because of social pressures, they are considering going back under the old covenant. But if they do, they must reject—and lose the benefits of—One better than Moses.

1. Superior in His person, 3:1-6

The Son is faithful like Moses. But unlike Moses, He is the Builder of God's house rather than part of it. He is the Son over the house rather than a servant in it. And He is the Fulfiller of what Moses prefigured and predicted. Carefully observe that those who belong to the Son show it by perseverance: "we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (3:6; cf. 3:14).

2. The danger of disbelief, 3:7-19

Second Main Warning

We must avoid "a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." Those who turn away will not enter God's rest. We should consider the greatness of the living God and the offer He makes.

Readers are warned not to repeat the history of Israel, who made God angry. In the desert they rejected God's offer, as Psalm 95 states it, to enter into God's rest. His rest would have been the Promised Land *under certain conditions*. When the next generation did enter, it was no longer "God's rest" (Heb. 4:8). The invitation had been withdrawn until the day called "Today" (3:13; 4:7, 8).

Those who enter God's rest "have come **to share** in Messiah" (3:14). The Greek expresses this with a noun (*metochoi*), the same noun as for Messiah's "companions" in 1:9. They are the ones who persevere in faith, who "hold firmly till the end the confidence [they] had at first."¹³

3. Superior in His work, 4:1-13

This passage turns the warning sunny side up. To those who trust in Him, Jesus will give what Moses could not give: participation in God's rest. Moses brought Israel out of Egypt to give it. But neither he nor Joshua (their Old Testament "Jesus," 4:8) could do so.

This promised rest is often mentioned in Hebrews 3–4 but not defined. What is it? With our present theological biases, it is difficult to identify. Some think that it means eternal blessing in heaven. Others think it means a present experience of rest and peace. Some, seeing that their explanations don't fit all the evidence, believe its meaning keeps changing in these chapters! Most modern interpretations cannot explain (a) how the rest promised to us is clearly related to the rest Israel failed to get, or (b) why it was not always offered.

¹³ "Have come to share in Messiah" (3:14) is literally "have become companions (partners) of Messiah." The time for us to share with Him is primarily in His coming kingdom, as in 1:9. Our partnership does not become absolutely certain until "we hold firmly **till the end** the confidence we had at first" (cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13). Yet, that future sharing is already spoken of as a reality: "have become companions." Hebrews 2:5, 7, 8 also speak of that future day as though it were past: "He **has subjected** the world to come....you **crowned** him with glory and honor and **put everything** under his feet."

There is an explanation that fits all the evidence. It is epitomized in the Greek word for “Sabbath-rest” in Hebrews 4:9 (*sabatismos*). God’s rest to which we are invited is the coming kingdom to which His original Sabbath rest pointed. This was a common view among Hebrews and in the Early Church. Other Scriptures confirm it; His kingdom will be a “Sabbath rest for the people of God.” For example, 2 Thessalonians 1:7 promises us “relief...when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven.” Acts 3:19 predicts “times of refreshing” (Acts 3:19) when He comes to rule. Hebrews has already called it the “great salvation” (Heb. 2:3; cf. v. 10) that we will “inherit” (1:14). By faith that perseveres we should “make every effort to enter that rest” (Heb. 4:11). Are you making that “effort” of faith?

I have dealt with this matter in detail in my “What is God’s Rest, to which He Invites Us?” There I give proofs that it refers to the future kingdom. Here, in abbreviated form, are some of them.

- The Scriptural basis for Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13 is Psalm 95. This is one of the Enthronement Psalms (especially Psalms 95–100), which describe the future kingdom. The message in Psalm 95 offering “rest” has to do with the Promised Land (the heart of that kingdom) and is directly applied to the readers in Hebrews.
- The invitation to enter God’s rest was not always extended. It ceased and was renewed “a long time later” on “another day.” This shows that the “rest” must be a goal of history rather than a continuous condition.
- The promised “rest” is identified with God’s Sabbath rest (especially in Heb. 4:4–10), which points directly to the kingdom. The Sabbath is a shadow of what is to come (Col. 2:16–17).
- Entering the “rest” is equated with becoming “participants of Messiah” (3:14, literal). The same word for “participants” is used in 1:9 for Messiah’s “companions” who will share with Him in His kingdom.

C. His superiority to Aaron, 4:14 to 10:18

This is the last and longest of the three comparisons. Considering its length, it is the most important. It compares Jesus to Aaron, the first high priest of the old covenant and the forefather of all its succeeding priests. Jesus’ priesthood is better and affects many aspects of our life.

The writer begins with an introduction, then discusses, as usual, Jesus’ person and work. His person involves His appointment as priest (5:1–10) and His priestly order, that of Melchizedek (ch. 7). Between these two aspects of His person is the third warning, a long one (5:11 to 6:20). This warning includes a famous and much-disputed passage in 6:4–6. Under Jesus’ work the writer discusses the place where He ministers (8:1–5), the covenant He administers (8:6–13), and the single sacrifice He has made (9:1 to 10:18).

1. Introduction, 4:14-16

Here the writer mentions some advantages of having Jesus as high priest:

- He has gone through the heavens to reach God's very throne.
- He is a man ("Jesus") who will inherit everything ("Son of God").
- He can sympathize with us because He was "tempted in every way, just as we are."
- He has made God's throne our source of mercy and grace.
- He has given us constant access to that throne, even when in need.

2. Superior in His person, 5:1 to 7:28

a. His priestly appointment, 5:1-10

Does anyone doubt that the Son (the Heir) should also serve as priest? The prophetic Scripture in Psalm 110:4 clearly indicated that He would so serve.

This section gives the two requirements for being a priest (selected by God and from among men, 5:1–4) and how the Son fulfilled them (5:5–10). As a man "he learned obedience from what he suffered and [was] made perfect" (5:8b–9a). This does not imply that at an earlier time He was disobedient or morally imperfect. Instead, it means that He gained experience as a man—and thus became qualified to serve as priest.

b. The danger of degeneration, 5:11 to 6:20

Third Main Warning

We should worry if we are so "slow to learn" that we want to return to elementary principles under the law. We can find no maturity (nor repentance nor blessing nor final salvation) there. We should consider the facts that (a) the final revelation has come through Messiah and (b) believers have a sure hope guaranteed by God's oath.

At the beginning of this warning and near its end, the writer describes readers with the Greek word *nothroi*. The NIV translates the word as "slow to learn" (5:11) and "lazy" (6:12)—people who are not moving forward. The writer further describes them with three illustrations:

- By now they should have become teachers. Instead, they need to be taught "the elementary truths of God's word all over again" (5:12).
- They still "need milk, not solid food" (5:12–14).
- They are "laying again the foundation" (6:1) instead of going on to maturity in Messiah.

Such people are in grave danger of fulfilling 6:4–6, which describes those who see God's light and taste His good things but then "fall away."¹⁴ Whoever

¹⁴ Such apostates really exist. In Greek the final step ("have fallen away," NASB) is not hypothetical or conditional (not "if") but as real as the other steps. In the next verses their ensuing judgment is contrasted to "things that

refuses God's final revelation and turns back to the law will find no repentance there—and no hope. In contrast, however, most of the readers have demonstrated genuine faith. There will be “salvation” (6:9) for them. Their hope is sure until they “through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (6:11–12).

Succeeding verses (6:13–20) remind them/us that this is the same hope God promised Abraham. He guaranteed with His oath that He would bless Abraham and multiply him. Verses 18–20 keep saying that “we” are included in this promise and oath. We can ask for nothing surer or greater.

c. His priestly order, 7:1-28

After the third warning the writer continues to show how Jesus is better than Aaron in His person.¹⁵ The writer takes up the subject of Jesus' priestly order.¹⁶ As already seen by quoting Psalm 110:4 (see Heb. 5:6, 10), His order is not that of Aaron but the better one of Melchizedek. There are two parts to this argument, then a summary of the section.

(1) His Melchizedek order better than Aaron's, 7:1-10

Melchizedek's greatness refers to the way he was pictured in Scripture; he was “made like the Son of God” (7:3, NASB). In other words, he was made a type of Messiah: being both king and priest, superior to Abraham, and with a perpetual priesthood, 7:1-3. Being superior to Abraham, he was also superior to the Levitical priesthood embodied in Abraham, 7:4-10.¹⁷

(2) Some advantages of reverting to this order, 7:11-25

(a) This change makes possible a law that enables us to draw near to God, 7:11-19.

A divine law is of limited value unless someone can implement it. Thus, Messiah's “perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25; 2:12) requires His better priesthood. It begins by giving us access to God (Heb. 7:18–19).

(b) God's oath guarantees that the new law/covenant is better than the old one, 7:20-22.

accompany salvation” (6:9). Instead, it is like the judgment on tilled ground that produces “thorns and thistles” instead of grain. It gets no blessing but a curse (6:7–8).

¹⁵ The third warning has quite interrupted the argument, which resumes in 7:1. The last words of the warning (in 6:20) are like those just before it (in 5:10): “high priest in the order of Melchizedek.” Those words lead directly to the first verse after the warning (7:1): “This Melchizedek...”

¹⁶ “Priestly order” refers to the rules (arrangement, system) of His priesthood.

¹⁷ The “Levitical priesthood” means the same as “the order of Aaron” (7:11). Levi, the son of Jacob, is mentioned by name in 7:5, 6, 9, 10. God designated the tribe of Levi to be the priestly tribe. All priests were Levites, though not all Levites were priests. See Numbers 3–4 and cross references.

(c) The permanence of our Melchizedek-type priest guarantees a complete salvation, 7:23-25.

Messiah is not idle as He sits on His Father's throne. He constantly intercedes for believers as we struggle in this world.

(3) Summary, 7:26–28

This ends the section about Jesus' priestly person and bridges to the next section (Jesus' priestly work). It makes the following statements about our high priest:

- He is above the heavens [on God's throne].
- He has offered one sacrifice for sins.
- He is God's Son, perfected forever.

3. Superior in His work, 8:1 to 10:18

This long section concludes the three contrasts with a mighty crescendo. Rather than being poorer for losing Aaron and the old covenant, we are far richer.

a. He ministers in a better place, 8:1-5.

Our priest ministers in heaven, God's true sanctuary. The earthly sanctuary where Aaron ministered was only a divinely ordained copy and shadow.

b. He mediates a better covenant, 8:6-13.

Our priest administers the new covenant, which achieves a permanent relationship with God. In this covenant, first promised to the nation of Israel,¹⁸ God writes His laws on hearts (not on stones). He can do so because He forgives our sins.

c. He has offered a better sacrifice, 9:1 to 10:18.

Our priest Messiah did not offer an animal to God but His own body.

(1) Old covenant sacrifices could not give access to God, 9:1-10.

These verses show why a better sacrifice was needed—because old covenant sacrifices could never let people approach God. This was symbolized by the arrangement of the old covenant sanctuary; not even the high priest had the right to enter “the inner room.” That room symbolized God's real dwelling place in heaven, the Most Holy Place. And “the way into the

¹⁸ Though the new covenant was promised to Israel, Israel at the present has been set aside. “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in...” (Rom. 11:25b). Nevertheless, the day will come when “all Israel will be saved...” (Rom. 11:26a). This refers to the nation as a whole, not every individual. Meanwhile, Messiah has been working mostly with Gentiles. He has begun building the assembly (church) that will inherit His coming kingdom (Matt. 16:19; 25:34; James 2:5). Every time we observe the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the inauguration of the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). That covenant is already in operation (see also 2 Cor. 3). Yet, we should remember, as Hebrews shows, that it is much greater than us. It is the universal covenant for the coming kingdom. (See my writings on this subject.)

Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” (9:8). Why not? Because old covenant “sacrifices...were not able to clear the conscience” (9:9).

(2) Messiah’s sacrifice is better, 9:11 to 10:18.

Here Hebrews cites four ways in which Messiah’s sacrifice is better than those of the old covenant:

(a) It gives access to God, 9:11-14.

This sacrifice cleanses the conscience, not just the flesh.

(b) It inaugurates the new covenant, 9:15-24.

This sacrifice cleanses persons guilty under the first covenant. It thereby enables them to come under the new covenant and inherit the promises.

It is “the death of the one who made” the new covenant, as required to inaugurate it. This fact is not clear in the NIV translation of 9:15–18 but in the NASB:

15 ...He is the mediator of a new **covenant**, in order that...those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. 16 For where a **covenant** is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. 17 For a **covenant** is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. 18 Therefore even the first **covenant** was not inaugurated without blood.¹⁹

This sacrifice even cleanses heavenly things, thus preparing those things to take part in the eternal kingdom.

(c) It is made only once, 9:25-28.

Our priest does not have “to suffer many times...he has appeared once for all to do away with sin...” This stands in opposition to Roman Catholic teaching that the Mass is His continual sacrifice. Indeed, “he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” Will He bring it to you?

¹⁹ The NIV translates Greek *diatheke* as “covenant” in verses 15 and 18–20 but switches to “will” in verses 16–17. Possibly the translators did not realize that it was common to ratify Old Testament covenants with death. The maker(s) died symbolically in his/their sacrifices. See Genesis 15:7–21; Exodus 24:4–8; Jeremiah 34:18–20. “The death of the covenant maker inaugurating the first covenant was not real but symbolic; it was pictured by the death of animals, as seen in Exodus 24:4-8 (see also Gen. 15:7-21). But the death of the covenant maker inaugurating the new covenant was real.” (copied from my course on Hebrews)

(d) By cleansing the conscience, it accomplishes God's will, 10:1-18. Orthodox Judaism believes that God still wants animal sacrifices for sin. They will offer them when He allows the temple to be rebuilt. They are wrong because they do not understand two facts about such sacrifices: (a) why He previously required them, (b) that He fulfilled their meaning.

(i) Old covenant sacrifices could only remind of sins and point forward to better sacrifices.

If they had actually cleansed people inwardly, they would have ceased on their own (10:1-4).²⁰

(ii) Messiah accepted a body not in order to perpetuate the making of sacrifices but to accomplish God's will (10:5-10).

The writer shows that Messiah anticipated this result as expressed in Psalm 40:6–8.

(iii) By offering His body once for all, He made all of God's chosen ones perfect (that is, acceptable, 10:11-14).

Religions designed by human beings never teach that God provides full acceptance by His pure grace. They all assume that we must add something, at least by our good works which God's grace prompts. It is true that we will do good works—because He transforms us—but not as part of the price.

Because His sacrifice was finished, our priest sat down. Old covenant priests on service had no chairs; there would always be more sacrifices to make. Note again that as He sits, our priest waits “for his enemies to be made his footstool” (10:13). When that has happened, as shown in the Book of Revelation, He will begin His promised reign (Rev. 11:15–18).

(iv) This complete cleansing under the new covenant makes further sin offerings unnecessary (10:15-18).

There would not even be a new covenant unless Messiah's sin offering had made us truly acceptable (“perfect,” 10:14). Have you received this marvelous gift from God's hand?

²⁰ Apparently this was written before the sacrifices ceased at the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

II. Our Response, Persevering Faith, 10:19 to 13:17

A. Exhortation to faith, hope, and love, 10:19-25

Our faith is based on hope in the living God, who is faithful to His promises. Faith leads to love, especially for other believers. And by faith we “see the Day approaching” (10:25) for Jesus our Messiah to return with salvation.²¹ As we wait, for two reasons we have confidence to enter God’s presence: (a) Jesus has opened “a new and living way” to enter, through His own body, and (b) He is our great priest.

B. The danger of despising, 10:26-39

Fourth Main Warning

We must not “deliberately [= defiantly] keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth.” Those who continue such sin are left with “only a fearful expectation of judgment.” Instead, let us keep our confidence, such as the original readers had shown. After being enlightened, they had endured persecutions in view of the greater rewards of the coming salvation.

In this warning several Old Testament sources are quoted or referred to (see my study guide).²² The correct interpretation will agree with them. The sin of which it warns is not a common sin. Neither is its punishment a light one, such as, loss of rewards.

My title for this warning comes from the King James Version in 10:28, 29.²³ This sin is by no means our common failure due to the weakness of our flesh. Rather, it is the “defiant” sin described in Numbers 15:30–36. Those who commit it have “trampled the Son of God under foot...treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant... and...insulted²⁴ the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). Defiant sinners “throw away [their] confidence...shrink back and are destroyed” (10:29, 35, 39).

²¹ In the New Testament “the Day” (or “that Day”) often refers to a future period of time. Sometimes that time is made specific by a modifier, at least in the near context. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:8 it is “the day **of our Lord Jesus Messiah**.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:4, 5, 8 and 2 Thessalonians 1:10 the context identifies it as that same day. In other cases, however (such as, Matt. 7:22; Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8; Heb. 10:25), there are no modifiers in the context. It still refers to the Lord Jesus’ second coming to judge and rule. Just before 10:25 Hebrews has clearly referred to that glorious day: “Messiah was sacrificed once...and **he will appear a second time...to bring salvation** to those who are waiting for him” (9:28b, c).

²² Here are some examples of Old Testament sources for this warning. “If we deliberately keep on sinning” (10:26a). This defiant sin is defined and illustrated in Numbers 15:30–36. The “raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:27b). This quotes several words about the wicked in Isaiah 26:11. “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (10:28). This describes the death penalty for apostates who abandoned the law of Moses to worship other gods. See especially Deuteronomy 13:8, which includes the thought of “without mercy,” and Deuteronomy 17:2–6, which includes the “two or three witnesses.” See also the next footnotes.

²³ “He that **despised** Moses’ law” (10:28) is contrasted to the one who “hath done **despite** unto [= has insulted] the Spirit of grace” (10:29, KJV). See the next footnote.

²⁴ The verb translated “insulted” in 10:29 is used only once in the Greek language version of the Old Testament.

Their punishment is “fearful...judgment...raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (10:27). It is much more severe than dying “without mercy” (10:28–29). It is “a dreadful thing” (10:31), failure to “receive what he has promised” (10:36), and—in summary—to be “destroyed” (10:39).²⁵

The last verse in this warning bridges to the marvelous chapter that follows. It picks up two words from the Greek version of Habakkuk 2:4, quoted here in verse 38: the noun *faith* and the verb *shrinks back*. A literal translation could say

10:39 But we are not of **shrinking back** resulting in destruction but of **faith** resulting in salvation of the soul. 11:1 Now **faith** is....

C. Faith demonstrated in sacred history, 11:1-40

To encourage us to continue living by faith, this chapter shows how faith has been demonstrated in the past.

1. An explanation of faith, 11:1-3

Faith in God gives strength (only) because it lays hold of Him and His promise. These verses describe such faith in terms of what it produces: (a) assurance and certainty (11:1), (b) God’s approval (11:2), and (c) our understanding (11:3).

2. Examples of faith, 11:4-38

The people given here as examples are mostly in chronological order. However, they are presented in three successive categories that fit the experience of every believer: (a) righteousness, which we must obtain by faith; (b) God’s promises, which we must learn and live by; (c) deeds that He gives us to do. Only by faith can we please God (11:6) and receive His “commendation” (11:3, 39). The glory all belongs to Him.

a. Righteousness by faith, 11:4-7

These three examples lived up to and including the flood. They did not have the same experiences, but they all trusted the invisible God who judges.

b. Promises by faith, 11:8-22

This section emphasizes Abraham and his family. God’s basic promise mentioned for Abraham was “a place he would **later receive as his inheritance**” (11:8). The next verse calls it “the promised land”: “He made his home in the

That is in Leviticus 24:16, for the Hebrew word meaning “blasphemes.” The person guilty of this was to be stoned.

²⁵ The serious nature of shrinking back is seen in its result, “destruction.” The Greek word so translated, used only here in Hebrews, regularly means the opposite of eternal life (as in Matt. 7:13; John 17:12; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess. 2:3; 2 Pet. 2:3; 3:7; Rev. 17:8, 11). Therefore, shrinking back is not a minor sin. It is yet another description of leaving Christianity and going back to a Judaism apart from Messiah. (adapted from my Hebrews course)

promised land like a stranger in a foreign country...[living] in tents..." (11:9). That land was clearly Canaan, where he and his family lived as strangers.

Abraham by faith was also given "descendants as numerous as the stars" (11:11–12). Like him, his descendants "**did not receive the things promised**; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (11:13). They died without receiving the promised inheritance, but they saw it by faith.

Will Abraham and his descendants ever get their inheritance? Of course they will, when God raises them from the dead. Will they inherit the earthly land (Canaan) He originally promised? Yes, but only when it also becomes "a better country—a heavenly one" (11:16). It is still not ready for the people of faith. It still lacks the heavenly "city with foundations" that God "has prepared...for them" (11:10, 16).

That "heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" is still in heaven (Heb. 12:22). But it will eventually come "down out of heaven" (Rev. 21:2) to "the promised land." Then the heavenly will combine with the earthly. That is where Messiah will reign forever (Luke 1:32–33). That is where "many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). Will you be there to take part?

c. **Mighty deeds by faith, 11:23-38**

This section emphasizes Moses and the choices he made. He "was looking ahead to his reward" (11:26), to be given by "him who is invisible" (11:27). Like Moses, many others accomplished superhuman feats by faith. For some, their deeds seemed victories; for others, defeats. But God was with them all.

3. **The extension of faith, 11:39-40**

God commended all these heroes of faith. Yet, "none of them received what had been promised" (11:39). They could not receive it until our part of the story is complete. We, too, must now live by faith. Are you living by faith?

D. **Faith recommended for us, 12:1-29**

"Hebrews 12 reminds us of powerful reasons why our faith must persevere in hope (looking to the future). This chapter could be titled 'The Patience of Hope.'"²⁶ It also contains the last main warning of the book, based on a dramatic description of where we stand in history.

²⁶ This is quoted from my course on Hebrews.

1. The examples of patient endurance, 12:1-3

All believers are running a long-distance race, requiring faith that endures. The examples who encourage us “surround” us by means of the Scriptural records. They gave witness to God in the past. The main witness is Jesus Himself, who endured the shame of the cross in order to reach the joyful goal.

2. The endurance of discipline, 12:4-13

Without exception we must all endure God’s painful discipline. He disciplines His children because He loves them (12:4–8). He does it to make them holy (12:9–11). We should respond to Him with optimism and cooperation (12:12–13).

3. The ethics of those who endure, 12:14-17

Those who endure will “make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy” (12:14). This does not refer to the holiness they received when they first believed (10:10, 14) but that which results from enduring discipline (12:10). They must avoid the bad example of godless Esau, who “sold his inheritance rights” and could not regain his blessing.

4. An explanation for the ethics, 12:18-24

These verses sketch the ultimate spiritual reality now revealed. They (a) show what animates those who endure and (b) prepare for the fifth and final main warning of the book. The readers “have not come to” the fearful mountain of the first covenant (Mount Sinai) and the warning not to touch it. Instead, they “have come to” the elements of the new covenant and the eternal kingdom: “Mount Zion... heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God...angels...the church...God, the judge...the spirits of righteous men made perfect...Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood²⁷....”

5. The danger of denying (or defying), 12:25-29**Fifth Main Warning**

We must not “turn away from him who warns us from heaven.” The voice at the first covenant “shook the earth.” But this voice promises to shake everything that “can be shaken” and leave only the unshakable kingdom. Consider the God of fire who speaks—and the kingdom He promises.

E. Faith manifested by love and fidelity, 13:1-17

The “practical” part of this epistle concludes with a series of exhortations. They touch many aspects of life. Each reader should obey every exhortation that applies.

Verse 7 refers to former leaders: “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word

²⁷. “The sprinkled blood” is Messiah’s blood, which has inaugurated the new covenant (9:15–24). It offers pardon, whereas Abel’s blood cries out for vengeance (Gen. 4:10).

of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith” (NASB). Verse 17 refers to current leaders. Notice their responsibilities, the same as those for “elders” in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2.

Verses 10–16 build on the fact that under one high priest we are all priests.

- Unlike the priests of the old covenant, we are privileged to eat from “the sin offering...burned outside the camp”—fulfilled in Jesus. Going outside the Jewish “camp” guaranteed these Hebrews a share in Jesus’ disgrace (13:10–14). Neither will the world love us (John 15:18–19).
- We can all offer sacrifices such as praise to God and sharing with others (13:15–16).

Conclusion, 13:18-25

This epilogue (a) requests and offers prayer and (b) shares personal information about the writer.

He writes to a specific group of people who know him, desiring to see them again soon (13:19). He informs them that Timothy has been released from prison. “If he [Timothy] arrives soon,” they will travel together to see the readers. “Those from Italy send...greetings.”²⁸

The prayer in 13:20–21 is a marvelous doxology. The “eternal covenant” it mentions is the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus’ blood. Jesus is, and always will be, “that great Shepherd of the sheep”—of us, His people. Through Him God equips us to do His own will and please Him (cf. Phil. 2:13). To Jesus²⁹ “be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

²⁸ Such information affects our guesses about the writer, the readers, and the date of writing. Timothy’s imprisonment and release fit none of the situations we know during the apostle Paul’s life. Paul and the Book of Acts refer to Timothy often, but always as a free man. That probably means that Hebrews was written by someone else after Paul’s death in A.D. 64. Consider the greetings from “those from Italy.” Does that suggest that the readers were in Palestine? No, because believers there would resent the writer’s always quoting from the Greek version of the Old Testament. Does it suggest Rome? No, since the date was after 64, when Paul was martyred there. If writing to Rome after 64, the writer would hardly say, “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (12:4).

²⁹ The order of words favors this interpretation. But it is possible that the writer wants the glory to go to God the Father, as in Romans 11:36. Revelation 5:13 shows that it will be eternally for them both.

An Outline of Hebrews

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Prologue (Theme), 1:1-4

I. The Superiority of the Son, 1:4 to 10:18

- A. His superiority to angels, 1:4 to 2:18
 - 1. Superior in His person, 1:4-14
 - 2. The danger of drifting, 2:1-4
 - 3. Superior in His work, 2:5-18
- B. His superiority to Moses, 3:1 to 4:13
 - 1. Superior in His person, 3:1-6
 - 2. The danger of disbelief, 3:7-19
 - 3. Superior in His work, 4:1-13
- C. His superiority to Aaron, 4:14 to 10:18
 - 1. Introduction, 4:14-16
 - 2. Superior in His person, 5:1 to 7:28
 - a. His priestly appointment, 5:1-10
 - b. The danger of degeneration, 5:11 to 6:20
 - c. His priestly order, 7:1-28
 - 3. Superior in His work, 8:1 to 10:18
 - a. A better place, 8:1-5
 - b. A better covenant, 8:6-13
 - c. A better sacrifice, 9:1 to 10:18

II. Our Response, Persevering Faith, 10:19 to 13:17

- A. Exhortation to faith, hope, and love, 10:19-25
- B. The danger of despising, 10:26-39
- C. Faith demonstrated in sacred history, 11:1-40
 - 1. An explanation of faith, 11:1-3
 - 2. Examples of faith, 11:4-38
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- D. Faith recommended for us, 12:1-29
 - 1. The examples of patient endurance, 12:1-3
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 - 3. The ethics of those who endure, 12:14-17
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 - 5. The danger of denying, 12:25-29
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Conclusion, 13:18-25