

The Church & Old Testament Saints in Hebrews 12:22–24
Will They Always Be Distinct?
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Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version. Any emphasis is added. Jesus' title Messiah is often used instead of the equivalent Christ. Both mean the "Anointed" King.

“But you have come

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. to Mount Zion, 2. to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God... 3. to thousands of thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 4. to the church [ekklesia] of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.... | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. to God, the judge of all men, 6. to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 7. to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant... 8. to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”
(Hebrews 12:22–24) |
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This “heavenly” scene described in Hebrews 12:22–24 summarizes the message of the Book of Hebrews. Based on this scene and that message, the next verses (25–29) issue the book’s final major warning. Then chapter 13 concludes the book by giving practical commands for those who heed the warning. In this study we will analyze the heavenly scene and emphasize two of its eight items: (4) the New Testament church (*ekklesia*) and (6) the Old Testament saints. Finally, we will show why those two items will not always be distinct.

The Context for the Heavenly Scene

It Follows an Earthly Scene. The heavenly scene comes immediately after another and contrasting scene. Both are at mountains where God has spoken: (a) At Mount Sinai He gave the first covenant but **no access** to Himself. (b) At the heavenly Mount Zion He has given the new covenant **and also access**.

Two Scenes at Mountains, Hebrews 12:18–24			
At Mount Sinai (on earth)	12:18–21	“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning....”	Proceeds to sketch the fearful scene at Mount Sinai when the law—the first covenant—was given (see especially Exodus 19–20). No one dared approach that mountain, and even Moses trembled (cf. Deut. 9:19).
At Mount Zion (in heaven)	12:22–24	“but you have come to Mount Zion....”	Proceeds to sketch a joyous scene at the heavenly Mount Zion, where the new covenant is now in force and many have access.

It Leads to a Weighty Warning. God’s message at Mount Zion is His last word before He judges. It is His final and most complete revelation, introducing His eternal covenant. There-

fore, in 12:25–29 the book issues its fifth and final major warning: “See to it that you do not refuse¹ him who speaks” (v. 25). Each section of Hebrews has its own warning; in essence they all mean the same.

The Five Main Warnings in the Book of Hebrews			
	The Danger	Reference	Expressions of the Danger
1.	Drifting (from the Lord’s word about “salvation” in “the world to come”)	2:1–4	“drift away” (2:1) “ignore such a great salvation” (2:3)
2.	Disbelief or Hardening Hearts (after God has invited to His “rest”)	3:7–19	“harden your hearts” (3:8) “turns away from the living God” (3:12) “unbelief” (3:19; cf. 4:2)
3.	Degeneration or Falling Away (from God’s final revelation)	5:11—6:20	“laying again the foundation” (6:1) or “fall away” (6:6) rather than “go on to maturity”
4.	Despising (God’s Son and Spirit) (“Despised” is used in the King James Version translation of 10:28–29.)	10:26–39	“deliberately keep on sinning” (10:26) “trampled the Son of God under foot...treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant ...insulted the Spirit of grace” (10:29) “throw away your confidence” (10:35) “shrink back and are destroyed” (10:38–39)
5.	Denying or Refusing (God who speaks from the heavenly mountain)	12:25–29	“refuse him who speaks...turn away from him who warns us from heaven” (12:25)

This last warning is weighty because of (a) Who has spoken, (b) what He has said, and (c) what He is about to do.

- a. Who has spoken.** The warning is weighty because the Speaker is God Himself. His final message is the theme of the Book of Hebrews. Previously “God spoke **through** [Greek *en*] the prophets at many times and in various ways” (1:1). But now, “in these last days he has spoken to us **by** [Greek *en*] his Son” (1:2). The Greek word translated “through” (v. 1) and “by” (v. 2) here denotes God’s means of speaking. His previous, partial revelations were by means of prophets; His final revelation is by means of His Son.
- b. What He has said.** The warning is weighty also because God has revealed the only Savior and invited us to follow Him. God’s final revelation is not only by means of His Son but concerning His Son. Jesus is exalted in each section of Hebrews and in the warning for each

¹ The Greek word here translated “refuse” also means “decline, avoid, deprecate [feel and express disapproval], reject.” It amounts to denying or defying God.

section. The main argument about Him is in the brief introduction and the first three sections. They show that He is greater—both in His person and in His work—than all these key actors in the old covenant:

- God’s messengers, the angels (chapters 1–2)
- the prophet Moses (chapters 3–4)
- the priest Aaron (4:14—10:18)

God’s Final Revelation, About His Son, Hebrews 1:4 to 10:18			
Reference	Old Covenant Actors to whom the Son Is Superior	Superior in His Person	Superior in His Work
1:4 to 2:18	God’s messengers, the angels	God honored no angel as “Son.” He did/does honor Jesus as “Son” (1:5).	Jesus is leading many human beings—not angels—to glory in “the world to come” (2:5, 10, 15).
3:1 to 4:13	the prophet Moses	“Moses was faithful as a servant in... God’s house.” Jesus was faithful “as a son over God’s house” (3:5–6).	Jesus is leading His “partners” (3:14, Greek) to God’s “Sabbath-rest” (4:3, 6; and <i>sabbatismos</i> in 4:9), which Moses could not do.
4:14 to 10:18	the priest Aaron	Aaron became priest because of his family. Jesus became priest because of His indestructible life (7:16).	By His “one sacrifice Jesus has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (10:14). Therefore, by Him we now “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place” (10:19). Aaron and all other priests under the law, could not accomplish that. They had no sacrifice that could make worshipers perfect and thus open the veil for them (9:6–10).

In short, God’s final word concerns the One who is “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:9). By the Son God has opened the door to salvation. “Salvation” is far more than forgiveness. Hebrews 2 identifies “this salvation...announced by the Lord” (2:3) with “the world to come, about which we are speaking” (2:5). To share in the “glory and honor” of that coming world (2:7, 10) means to share in the Son’s coming kingdom.

- c. What God is about to do.** The warning is also weighty because God is about to shake everything else and establish His kingdom on earth (12:26–28). God’s action is introduced in verse 26 and quoted from Haggai 2:6, which looks forward to the coming of that kingdom. At Sinai God’s voice “shook the earth” (see Exod. 19:18; Ps. 68:7–8). “But now he has

promised,” says Haggai, “‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’”² He will do this in order to remove “what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” (Heb. 12:27). What will remain is the “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (v. 28a), the kingdom “we are receiving” (see Luke 12:32³).

In other words, God will (a) shake and remove temporary things in order to (b) establish His eternal kingdom, which will be ruled by Messiah and shared by us. Those who refuse/defy God will lose everything; those who listen to Him will gain everything. If we have part in that unshakable kingdom, our response should be both gratitude and awe (Heb. 12:28b).

Having looked at the context of the heavenly scene, let us consider its details.

People & Things in the Heavenly Scene

Reread the eight items quoted under “But you have come” on page 1. As stated before, these items summarize the message of the Book of Hebrews. Consider some examples:

- Items 1 and 2: The scene takes place at the “**Mount Zion**” where “**the heavenly Jerusalem**” is located. No doubt this is “in heaven,” the location of “the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (Heb. 8:1–2).⁴ Hebrews had referred to this place previously as “the inner sanctuary...where Jesus...has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever” (6:19–20). Chapter 8 contrasts this “true tabernacle” with the man-made one, which the Lord ordered Moses to build at Mount Sinai. That earthly sanctuary was beautiful and important: “The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34, 35).⁵ Nevertheless, it was only “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (8:5). In the tabernacle “behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place” (9:3). This was only a shadow of the original such room in “the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.” The climax to the argument in Hebrews is the fact that now “we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19; cf. 4:16).

² Many passages predict such a shaking during the tribulation. For examples, see Isa. 2:19–21; 13:13; Ezek. 38:19; Zech. 14:4; Matt. 24:7; Rev. 6:12; 11:13; 16:18.

³ “**We are receiving**” the kingdom (Heb. 12:28). The present tense is used here for something still future but sure to happen. This “futuristic present” is common (see John 4:25, “Messiah is coming”). The background for this assurance is Jesus’ promise in Luke 12:32: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father **has been pleased to give you the kingdom.**” Of course, the disciples knew that the promise was for the future. They were under no illusion that the kingdom had begun; it was near but had not started. Jesus had been telling “every town and place where he was about to go” (Luke 10:1) that “the kingdom of God has drawn near you” (10:9, 11, Greek). Jesus was assuring them that when the kingdom starts, the “little flock” will surely receive it. That interpretation fits the rest of Luke 12, where the Lord exhorts His disciples (a) to lay up incorruptible treasure in heaven and (b) be ready for the Master to return. See especially verses 21, 31, 33–34, 36–40, 43–46.

⁴ Unbelievers might doubt that these places are real. But the essence of faith is to be “certain of what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). All believers know that “what is seen is temporal, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

⁵ The temple that later replaced the tabernacle was essentially the same in function and meaning. Likewise, “The glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kings 8:11).

That heavenly city to which we “have come” was the confident expectation of all Old Testament saints. Like Abraham, they were “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). Yet, they “were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance” (11:13). Clearly, that city promised to Old Testament saints is the same city that they and we have reached: we “have come to” it. That does not mean that we already live in it: “Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:14; see also Gal. 4:26).

Revelation 21 pictures that “Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:2, 10). It will come to earth to be the capital of the eternal kingdom. Apparently it will sit on the heavenly Mount Zion, also moved to earth as the center of that kingdom (see Ps. 2:6; 48:1–2, 8; 102:12–22; 132:11–18; 146:10; Isa. 2:1–5).

- Item 3: The innumerable “**angels**” (cf. Rev. 5:11) are also present, not for their own sake but for (a) God’s Son and (b) the Son’s people.
 - a. Angels were contrasted in Hebrews 1:4–13 to the Son, “whom [God] appointed heir of all things” (1:2). He, not angels, is the righteous Ruler to be set “above [His] companions” (1:8–9). He, not they, will “remain the same” even when earth and heaven are “changed” (1:12). In contrast, angels are “winds” and “flames of fire” (1:7). When God “again brings his firstborn into the world,” He will have “all the angels of God worship him” (1:6, NET Bible).
 - b. Meanwhile, angels minister to Messiah’s people, His partners⁶ (1:9), who will inherit with Him. Angels are “ministering spirits sent [by God] to serve those who will inherit salvation” (1:14; 2:3). Throughout Hebrews, and as first made explicit in 2:5, 10, “salvation” refers to partnership with Messiah in “the world to come.” That will be Messiah’s kingdom, when He “will appear a second time...to bring salvation” (9:28). In the fifth warning, that salvation/coming kingdom is called the “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28). The presence of “angels in joyful assembly”⁷ at the heavenly Zion suggests that His unshakable kingdom is about to begin!
- Item 5: “**God, the judge.**” The Book of Hebrews shows how “God...has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2). This is His final word before He judges the world, as we are reminded—explicitly or implicitly—in every major warning of Hebrews.⁸ The main point of the final warning is to “not refuse him who speaks, [not] turn away from him who warns us from heaven” (12:25). When He speaks again, He will “shake not only the earth but also the heavens,” leaving only the unshakable kingdom (12:26–28).

⁶ Greek *metochoi*, which NIV translates as “companions” in Hebrews 1:9. It translates it as “partners” (in a fishing business) in Luke 5:7, 10 and with some form of the verb “share” in Hebrews 3:1, 14 (where NET Bible has “partners”); and 6:4.

⁷ Greek *paneguris* refers to a “festal gathering” in Ezekiel 46:11; Hosea 2:11; 9:5; Amos 5:21.

⁸ See other warnings of His judgment in 2:3; 4:12–13; 6:8; and especially 10:26–31.

- Items 7 and 8: “**Jesus the mediator of a new covenant**” and “**the sprinkled blood.**” Both items are mentioned often in Hebrews. Jesus’ blood is His sacrificial death (e. g., 1:3; 2:9; 9:12, 14, 15, 26, 28; 10:10, 14, 19; 13:20). When “sprinkled” (that is, applied), “the blood of Messiah” has served to “cleanse our consciences” (9:14) and even purify “the heavenly things themselves” (9:23). Thus, it has inaugurated “the covenant of which he is mediator [and which] is superior to the old one” (8:6; see especially 9:11–28). Since this is an “eternal covenant” (13:20), the “new order” it imposes (9:10) will never fail. In contrast to “the blood of Abel,” which still cries for vengeance (11:4; cf. Gen. 4:10–11), Messiah’s blood brings peace.

Next we will consider the two groups of human beings (items 4 and 6) gathered at this heavenly mountain and city. They are the New Testament church (*ekklesia*) and “the spirits of righteous men made perfect,” who are apparently the Old Testament saints.

“The Church [*Ekklesia*] of the Firstborn”

The first group of human beings mentioned at Mount Zion is the New Testament *ekklesia* (church). This Greek term was used often in the Greek version of the Old Testament. As in Acts 7:38 it usually referred to the kingdom “assembly” of Israel beginning at Mount Sinai.⁹ But sometimes it was also used for the future kingdom assembly for the future Messiah. An example is in Psalm 22:22, as quoted in Hebrews 2:12. There Messiah predicted, “In the presence of the congregation [*ekklesia*] I will sing your praises.”¹⁰

When did the predicted *ekklesia* begin? Clearly it had not begun far into Jesus’ ministry, when He first mentioned it by name. That first time was late in the period of His withdrawals from Galilee.¹¹ It was when the apostles, through Simon Peter, confessed that He is the Messiah (Matt. 16:16). On that occasion He spoke of His kingdom assembly as future: “On this rock I **will build my church**” (Matt. 16:18).

So when did He begin to build it? There is no need to guess. It was when He began to baptize in/with the Spirit, an event clearly marked out in Acts. The proof is as follows:

- “The church [*ekklesia*]...is **his body**” (Eph. 1:22–23).

⁹ Israel was first designated as God’s *ekklesia* (assembly) at Mount Sinai, when they first became God’s kingdom (Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; etc.). They were also so called when assembled as God’s kingdom people on other occasions (Deut. 23:1–3; 31:30; 2 Chron. 7:8; 20:5, 14; etc.).

¹⁰ Some believe that the apostle Paul called the church (*ekklesia*) a newly-revealed secret (mystery/*musterion*). To prove this, they most often cite Ephesians 3:6. However, it is not the *ekklesia*’s **existence** he calls a secret but its **composition**. “This mystery is that through the gospel the **Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body**, and **sharers together in the promise** in Messiah Jesus.” This fact is the same one Paul had just addressed in Ephesians 2:11–22, that in this “one body” Gentiles have equal status with Jews.

¹¹ In all four Gospels the *ekklesia* was mentioned by that name in only two verses: Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 (and not again until Acts 5:11). By no means, however, does absence of the name indicate lack of interest. Everything Messiah Jesus said and did had some relation to His coming body as well as to His coming kingdom. And the Gospels were written for that *ekklesia*.

- That body of His is built as people are baptized with or in the Spirit: “We were all baptized **in/with one Spirit into one body**” (1 Cor. 12:13, Greek; see NET Bible). Thus, this baptism is what builds the church.
- It is **Messiah** who **does this baptizing** in/with the Spirit. The Baptizer is He, not the Spirit. The Spirit is the place **in** whom or the means **with** which He baptizes.¹² This work fulfills the promise given through John the Baptist and recorded in all four Gospels and Acts: “I baptize you with water....But after me will come one who is more powerful than I...**He will baptize you** with [or in] the Holy Spirit...” (Matt. 3:11).
- Messiah began doing this work—and thus, building the church—at **Pentecost** (Acts 2). Before departing to the Father, He had commanded His disciples, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4–5). They received that gift on “the day of Pentecost” (2:1), when Jesus poured the Spirit on them from heaven. On that occasion Peter explained, “Exalted to the right hand of God, [Jesus] has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33).¹³ On a later occasion Peter saw Gentiles receive the same gift (Acts 10:44–48). When he reported that event to the church at Jerusalem, Peter said, “The Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’...God gave them the same gift as he gave us” (11:15–17).

The main significance of this divine gift of the Spirit is that God now permanently lives in believers. As pointed out under items 7 and 8, this marvelous new arrangement is called the new covenant (see 2 Cor. 3, especially vv. 6 and 18). By His indwelling Spirit God is truly transforming us. His presence is “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14). No one is in the *ekklesia* (Messiah’s body) who lacks the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). No one who receives the Spirit is left outside the *ekklesia*.

Hebrews 12:23 says this *ekklesia* consists of “the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” The Son was called God’s “firstborn” in 1:6, referring to His exalted position.¹⁴ But He will not rule alone; many other “firstborn” will rule with Him (Heb. 2:5–10; 2 Tim. 2:12). They are called “firstborn” because they are exalted like Him. Their “names are written in heaven,” not

¹² The translation at 1 Cor. 12:13 should be “**with** one Spirit” or “**in** one Spirit.” NIV’s “**by** one Spirit” can be misunderstood, as though the Spirit may be the Agent. But the Greek used here (*en* plus dative)—as in all the parallel passages—apparently never means agent but means or place. In *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, pp. 373f, Daniel B. Wallace says that “*en* plus the dative to express agent...is rare at best.” On 1 Cor. 12:13 he adds: “This is an illustration of *en* used for *means*....The Holy Spirit is the instrument that Christ uses to baptize.”

¹³ In his explanation in Acts 2:33 Peter used language he had quoted (in v. 16) from Joel 2:28: “I will pour out my Spirit.” This was only one of several figures of speech by which Old Testament prophets referred to God’s future gift of the Holy Spirit. They meant the same thing John the Baptist and Jesus meant by “baptize with the Spirit.” For other examples, see Isaiah 59:21 and Ezekiel 36:27.

¹⁴ The background for this term (*prototokon*) is its use for King David in Psalm 89:27: “I will also appoint him my firstborn, **the most exalted of the kings of the earth.**” David was certainly not born first in his family—but was exalted by God.

because they have gone to heaven but because God has chosen them (2 Thess. 2:13). The same thought (using an equivalent but different verb) occurs in Luke 10:20: “rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” The people so described were certainly not in heaven but were enrolled there.

We can conclude that the *ekklesia* has come to the heavenly mountain and city by faith, not bodily. Already “we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19). Already He has opened for us “a new and living way,” and He is our “great priest over the house of God” (10:20–21). Already, therefore, we “draw near to God” (10:22; cf. 4:16). We draw near now, while still living on earth, not just after we die. It is in this sense that the *ekklesia* stands before the heavenly mountain.¹⁵

“The Spirits of Righteous Men Made Perfect”

The other group of human beings at the heavenly Mount Zion seems to be Old Testament saints. They are “righteous” because they lived by faith (Heb. 11:4, 7). Yet, they all died (11:13) and became disembodied “spirits” until the resurrection. Many in the *ekklesia*, of course, have not died and are not “spirits.”

These spirits are not only or specifically the nation of Israel. The Book of Hebrews has indeed spoken about Israel and its covenant made at Sinai (8:8–10). But it has also referred to other believers, such as, Melchidezek (7:1), Abel (11:4), Enoch (11:5), Noah (11:7), and Abraham (11:8). There is no reason to bar them from the mountain.

These Old Testament saints have been “made perfect.” In what sense? Hebrews uses this verb in different ways. One way refers to attaining one’s goal and inheritance. In this sense, which we will call Perfection A, Old Testament saints are not yet perfect: “None of them received what had been promised. God had planned...so that only together with us would they **be made perfect**” (11:39–40). But “made perfect” also refers to being completely forgiven (10:18). We will call this Perfection B. In this sense all believers—including Old Testament saints—are now perfect. “By one sacrifice he [Messiah] **has made perfect** forever those who are being made holy” (10:14). Only by Perfection B (forgiveness) can they attain to Perfection A (inheritance). When Messiah “set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant,” He could put them under the “new covenant.” That covenant enables “those who are called [to] receive the promised eternal inheritance” (9:15).

¹⁵ In a similar sense Paul says that God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col. 1:13). Alva McClain, in *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, explains how we can be in His future kingdom before it starts! We are there *de jure* (legally) though not *de facto* (in fact). Our real “life is now hidden with Messiah in God” and “will appear” when He returns (Col. 3:1–4).

Perfection of OT Saints		
Status Until Messiah’s Death	Present Status (Perfection B)	Future Goal (Perfection A)
Justified by faith “on credit”	Forgiven forever on the basis of Messiah’s death—qualified for the new covenant of the Spirit	To be raised from the dead and to receive their promised inheritance

Will These Two Groups Ever Merge?

As we have seen, Hebrews 12:22–24 includes two groups of people who have come to the heavenly things. They are the Old Testament saints and the *ekklesia*. These two groups are represented throughout Hebrews: (a) The main representatives—but not all—of the Old Testament saints are Israel when brought under the old covenant. (b) The *ekklesia* is all those who have responded to God’s final word. Will these two groups ever merge into one? The answer is **Yes**, for the following reasons, drawn mostly from Hebrews.¹⁶

1. Old Testament saints have the **same basic promises** as the *ekklesia*. Hebrews suggests no distinctions in their future hope:
 - the same salvation in the world to come (Heb. 1–2)
 - the same Sabbath rest awaiting God’s people (Heb. 3–4)
 - the same divine blessing and multiplication confirmed by God’s oath to Abraham (Heb. 6)
 - the same new covenant originally promised to Israel but already administered by Messiah (Heb. 8)
 - the same heavenly city and country (Heb. 11, 13)
 - the same unshakable kingdom (Heb. 12:28)

This is not to deny that the nation of Israel is guaranteed a special and glorious part in that future. God will fulfill His many promises to that nation (Romans 11:15, 26; 15:8). In fact, in one sense He will “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). They, like us, will “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:10; Matt. 25:34)—but only as Messiah’s people. Some think that Israel has only “earthly” promises whereas the *ekklesia*’s promises are “heavenly.” That is a big mistake. The two adjectives have never been, and never will be, mutually exclusive.

¹⁶ A few Christian teachers doubt that Hebrews has “church truth.” They believe that it was designed for an interim group of Israelites confessing Jesus as Messiah but not the full-fledged *ekklesia*. Some treat Matthew and James—even parts of Acts or other books—in the same way. At times they seem to use this approach to dispose of Scriptural teachings they consider inferior. However, the approach is not legitimate, since what Messiah began doing on the Day of Pentecost was to build His *ekklesia*. There was no other group through which and for which all the New Testament—all of it written after Pentecost—could be written. Even though that group in the beginning had a majority of Hebrews, God’s messages for them considered them as *ekklesia*, not as the nation of Israel. Paul still spoke of “Jews, Greeks, or the *ekklesia* of God” (1 Cor. 10:32)—but no fourth group.

Hebrews 11 describes many Old Testament saints who, just like us (1 Peter 1:4, 13) will inherit **on earth** treasures they laid up **in heaven**.

2. Old Testament saints **will not always be in a different situation** from the *ekklesia*. The reason for distinguishing them now will not persist. What is that reason? Simply that Old Testament saints died and became “spirits” before Messiah’s *ekklesia* could be formed. They became “righteous” only, as it were, “on credit.” They were “made perfect” later, after Messiah offered the sacrifice that could perfect them. Thus, the distinction between them and us, grounded in history, is being erased. When they are raised from the dead and glorified along with us, that distinction will cease.
3. Old Testament saints **will be part of Messiah’s kingdom assembly**. Since that assembly is—by definition—the *ekklesia*, they will be part of it.¹⁷
4. Old Testament saints **will receive the Holy Spirit and come under the new covenant in order to receive their eternal inheritance** (Heb. 9:15). Nothing else can qualify them. That gift of the Spirit is the same as the baptism with the Spirit, which adds people to the *ekklesia*.¹⁸ Even Israel as a whole will be cleansed (Zech. 12:10; 13:1); “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). Then there will be no essential difference between them and us.

If you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (Romans 11:24)

There shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:16)

¹⁷ This reason is adjunct to the first reason. That one is based on their hope, this one, on the breadth of the term.

¹⁸ This was Jesus’ point with Nicodemus. Like his fellow Council member, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus “was waiting for the kingdom of God” (Luke 23:50–51). As “Israel’s teacher” (John 3:10), he was expecting that kingdom to be both spiritual and material, as the prophets had said. Jesus did not redefine the kingdom nor say that it had begun. But He did unsettle Nicodemus by pointing out what he should have known from the prophets: “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (3:3–6).