

**Good Word Schedule**  
**“In These Last Days: The Message of Hebrews”**  
**January, February, March, 2022**

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|------------|---------------|---|
| <b>#1</b>  | <b>Jan 1</b>  | <b>“The Letter to Hebrews and to Us”</b>          |
| <b>#2</b>  | <b>Jan 8</b>  | <b>“The Message of Hebrews”</b>                   |
| <b>#3</b>  | <b>Jan 15</b> | <b>“Jesus, the Promised Son”</b>                  |
| <b>#4</b>  | <b>Jan 22</b> | <b>“Jesus, Our Faithful Brother”</b>              |
| <b>#5</b>  | <b>Jan 29</b> | <b>“Jesus, the Giver of Rest”</b>                 |
| <b>#6</b>  | <b>Feb 5</b>  | <b>“Jesus, the Faithful Priest”</b>               |
| <b>#7</b>  | <b>Feb 12</b> | <b>“Jesus, the Anchor of the Soul”</b>            |
| <b>#8</b>  | <b>Feb 19</b> | <b>“Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant”</b>  |
| <b>#9</b>  | <b>Feb 26</b> | <b>“Jesus, the Perfect Sacrifice”</b>             |
| <b>#10</b> | <b>Mar 5</b>  | <b>“Jesus Opens the Way Through the Veil”</b>     |
| <b>#11</b> | <b>Mar 12</b> | <b>“Jesus, Author and Perfector of Our Faith”</b> |
| <b>#12</b> | <b>Mar 19</b> | <b>“Receiving an Unshakeable Kingdom”</b>         |
| <b>#13</b> | <b>Mar 26</b> | <b>“Let Brotherly Love Continue”</b>              |

Guests for this series of GOOD WORD broadcasts are Brant Berglin and Dave Thomas, both members of the Walla Walla University School of Theology. Moderator, host, and study guide author is Alden Thompson, Professor Emeritus of the WWU School of Theology.

For more information about GOOD WORD contact the School of Theology at Walla Walla University by phone (509-527-2194), fax (509-527-2945), email ([GoodWord@wallawalla.edu](mailto:GoodWord@wallawalla.edu)) or regular mail (Walla Walla University, 204 S. College Ave., College Place WA 99324).

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**Theme:** “The Letter to Hebrews and to Us”

**Leading Question:** Is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ better than all previous revelations?

**Note:** A resource I have found very helpful in preparing this study guide has been William Johnsson’s *Hebrews*, in the Abundant Life Bible Amplifier series (PPPA, 1994). References in the study guide to Johnsson are simply indicated by his last name and the page number.

Our leading question brings several other questions into play that we should consider.

**Question:** If the revelation of God in Jesus is better than all others (as the letter to the Hebrews implies), why did God give lesser revelations in the first place? Shouldn’t God always give just the “best” revelations?

**Answer:** Perhaps because the people were not ready.

**Question:** What is the best biblical evidence that God meets people where they are?

**Answer:** Some of the horrifying stories in the Old Testament, such as the story of Achan in Joshua 7, where God chose to make use of the Canaanite custom of *cherem* = dedication to destruction, vividly illustrate the principle of “accommodation.”

**Question:** Is the truth of Hebrews’ argument that Jesus is a “better” revelation, affected by his use of scripture, i.e. all of his quotations of the Old Testament are cited out of context, in accordance with the Jewish practice of “midrash,” an approach to Scripture that reads later meanings into earlier passages of Scripture? To what extent are any of our significant conclusions shaped *initially* by Scripture? Or does scriptural support come after the experience?

**Comment:** Many times the “chicken-or-egg” question turns up a surprising answer if we stop and think about it. C. S. Lewis’ comment about the role of the Gospels is a case in point:

“The earliest converts were converted by a single historical fact (the Resurrection) and a single theological doctrine (the Redemption) operating on a sense of sin which they already had -- and sin, not against some new fancy-dress law produced as a novelty by a ‘great man,’ but against the old, platitudinous, universal moral law which they had been taught by their nurses and mothers. The ‘Gospels’ come later, and were written, not to make Christians, but to edify Christians already made. (*The Screwtape Letters* [1961], ch. 23, par. 3).

In short, the author's convictions about his "better" revelation seem not to have been determined by discoveries that he had made in Scripture. These came later. His convictions about Jesus came from his knowledge of the story of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus himself taught largely by "stories." Was that the reason why the common people heard him gladly?

**Question:** The official study guide suggests that the book of Hebrews was the first Christian sermon. Do we learn of Jesus primarily by sermons?

**Comment:** The official study guide notes that the author of the book of Hebrews describes his dissertation as a "sermon" (Heb. 13:22 = "word of exhortation"), a phrase that is repeated in Acts 13:15 and abbreviated to simply "exhortation" in 1 Tim. 4:13. Also, in Hebrews 13:22 the author says that he has written "briefly"! One could perhaps argue that 13 chapters would not be considered "brief" in our day.

**Question:** The crucial question is: How do we learn about Jesus? In Hebrews 2:4. The author refers to three additional factors that are often part of a believer's experience:

- a) signs and wonders
- b) miracles
- c) gifts of the Spirit

**Comment:** Ellen White has some striking statements about the diversity in our experiences:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil. – *Ministry of Healing*, 483

**Question:** From the book itself, what can we learn about the experience of the recipients of Hebrews?

**Comment:** These are some of the clues from the book:

- Hebrews 2:1: The danger of drifting away
- Hebrews 3:12 Caution about the dangers of an evil and unbelieving heart
- Hebrews 5:11-14 They should have been leaders, but had to stay on milk
- Hebrews 10:25 Warned about the danger of neglecting corporate worship
- Hebrews 10:32-36: Experience with sufferings, persecution, public mockery
- Hebrews 12:3 Cautioned about becoming weary and losing heart

**Note:** A question like the previous one shows the value of simply reading the text of Scripture rather than depending on commentaries. When we see cautions, admonitions, and warnings, we can surmise that these were threats to the believers.

**A powerful biblical example:** As an encouragement to modern readers, the official study guide points to Elijah's experience when he fled from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:1-4. Elijah went from a spiritual high on Carmel, to deep despair. But God gave him both food and words of encouragement. God's willingness to do the same for us should be a source of great comfort.

**Note: Complexity and simplicity in Hebrews.** Much of the material in Hebrews is complex and closely argued. Could children, the illiterate, the new convert, understand that complexity? Not likely. So we will attempt during this quarter to find ways to simplify the issues, remembering that Jesus could summarize his teaching in one short verse: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12)

**Theme: “The Message of Hebrews”**

**Leading Question:** “Is it more difficult for modern people to believe that Jesus was fully God, or that he was fully human?”

**Comment:** In our largely secular world, any discussion of a God/Man is likely to be foreign territory. Which would be the “easier” goal to reach: to teach that Jesus was God or that Jesus was Human?

For this week’s lesson, I want to look more closely at Hebrews 2. The Adult SS study guide actually sketches out a very broad scope for the lesson: “The Message of Hebrews.” And if you scan the list of topics for the quarter, it becomes clear that the message of Hebrews is simple: Jesus! Through the quarter, our plan is to keep an eye open to the emphasis in the study guide, but also to focus more closely on one or more of the 13 chapters of Hebrews each week. So this week we look at five select passages in Hebrews 2:

**Hebrews 2:1:** “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.”

**Question:** Just what was it that the believers were to “pay greater attention to”?

**Comment:** If Hebrews 1 emphasizes Jesus’ divinity, and Hebrews 2 his humanity, what is the logical focus of the author’s concern: his divinity, his humanity, or both? In 2:2-4 the author compares the judgment on those who rejected the earlier covenant that was mediated by angels, with the judgment that could be expected if one rejects the salvation which God himself gave in Jesus Christ.

In 2:1 the word translated in the NRSV as “drift away from” not only has been used of ships, but also of a ring that slips off the finger and is thus lost. This is serious business. “Pay attention,” Hebrews says. Don’t let the truth drift away from you.

**Question:** Are believers today more inclined to simply “drift away” or do they suddenly depart the faith?

**Hebrews 2:9:** “. . . so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” – or, that “apart from God he might taste death for everyone.”

**Question on a textual variant:** The best attested reading is “by the grace of God” but a earlier (less-well-attested reading) is “apart from God he might taste death.” Either way can be a powerful reading, but Johnsson (p. 69) expresses a preference for “apart from God” as being more powerful. What Christ did for us on the cross was done in the absence of God (cf. Psalm 22). What is your preference?

**Hebrews 2:10:** “That God. . . should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

**Question:** How is it that the perfect Son of God should be made “perfect through sufferings?”

**Comment:** As chapter 2 will go on to explain, it was necessary for Jesus to share the experience of those whom he came to save. Thus he became “like his brothers and sisters,” and thus became qualified to serve as a high priest for them.

**Hebrews 2:11:** “. . . Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”

**Question:** How is it that the Creator of the Universe was/is willing to be on an equal footing with the plodding and often wayward creatures which now inhabit the planet?

**Comment:** Perhaps there is an echo here of that amazing egalitarian statement of Jesus when James and John asked for the highest places in Jesus’ Kingdom:

Matthew 20:25 You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones [exercise authority (NIV)] over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to [become (NIV)] great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. – Matthew 20:25-28, NRSV/NIV

In short, Jesus came to serve, not to be served. And this one who came to serve is the Master of the universe.

**Hebrews 2:14-15:** “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

**Comment:** Death looms large in these verses. Hebrews not only announces the end of death but also the fear of death. Does the story of Jesus accomplish that for us?

**Question:** The official study guide uses several headings under which he orders the thoughts of the author of Hebrews. Which of these are most likely to be helpful today? King, Mediator, Champion, High Priest?

**Theme: “Jesus the Promised Son”**

**Leading Question:** What makes Jesus, the promised Son, better than Moses?

**Comment:** Since the whole quarter’s study focuses on Jesus the “better” revelation, it is no surprise that this lesson emphasizes the “Promised Son.”

**Question:** How does Hebrews 1:1-4 sharpen the focus on the “Son” more sharply than any other passage in the book? Why should this particularly label loom so large for the author of Hebrews?

**Some specific comparisons in chapter 3 that are worth noting:**

**Hebrews 3:2-6:** This passage compares Moses and Jesus. At first glance, the passage almost suggests “no contest” since Jesus was God’s Son and Moses was God’s servant. It would be well for us to note the common ground between the two, not just the contrasts. And in that respect, just one point stands out: Both were “faithful” (3:2). But that is where the similarity ends, for Moses was a servant “in all of God’s house” (3:5) and Jesus was the builder of the house (3:3). Jesus was also “over God’s house as a Son” (3:6) and we are his “house” “if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope” (3:6).

**Question:** To what extent is the comparison between Jesus and Moses potentially encouraging and to what extent potentially discouraging?

**Comment:** Jesus is off the chart, so to speak, when we compare ourselves to him. Moses may be more manageable. After all Moses was a human like us. Could that comparison tempt us to water down the ideal?

**Faith and Belief: a tantalizing comparison.** Johnsson (pp. 80-81) notes an intriguing and potentially misleading comparison between the English word “belief” and the Greek equivalent which means both “faith” and “belief” without distinction.

**Question:** When Hebrews 3:18 states that Israel could not enter the promised land because of “unbelief” (NRSV), is there a significant difference in nuance if we translate the word as “lack of faith” or “lack of faithfulness?” In English, what does the choice of “faith” vs. “belief” mean when we talk about such things as “the life of faith” or the “life of belief.” Is “belief” more cognitive whereas “faith” is more holistic? Is one word more experiential, one more theological?

**Apostle: a unique application to Jesus.** In 3:1, Jesus is described as “the apostle and high priest of our confession.” As Johnsson notes (p. 92), this is the only passage in the entire New Testament that describes Jesus as apostle. Why should that be surprising?

**Comment:** Johnsson (p. 82) states that “*apostle*” sums up what has gone before, and “high priest” gathers together the exciting theological plan that is to come.” An “apostle” simply means someone who has been sent. One can see how that could apply to Jesus. The title “high priest” is unusual since Jesus was from the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Levi was the priestly tribe. Does that distinction make sense?

**Question: open rejection or neglect?** Johnsson (p. 85) summarizes chapter 3 with this paragraph:

“Even while we are members of the people of God, a slow insidious change may be taking place. Others may not know it, we may not know it, but God sees it. Our attitude to the Lord, our responsiveness to the Spirit, may be changing, not so much by open rejection as by neglect. Without wish or design, we may eventually find ourselves far from God’s people – apostates and rebels.”

Is this an appropriate application to our age today?

**Question: a good start or a good finish?** Johnsson (p. 87) draws a comparison between ancient Israel and the church today. When Israel left Egypt they made a wonderful start under a faithful leader. But they did not arrive in the promised land. Here is Johnsson’s summary:

“Starting well and having a great leader cannot in themselves assure spiritual success. Everyone who confesses Christ starts well, regardless of the era, and every Christian has the finest Leader in the universe. But *we* each have a part to play. Like the Israelites of old, we may gradually turn our hearts from God and become rebels, and thus we may forfeit our place in the “Promised Land” that we have been seeking. In the Christian life, it is not better to travel hopefully than to arrive; attainment of eternal rest is our goal.”



Theme: “Jesus, Our Faithful Brother”

**Leading Question:** Does Hebrews 4 support the Sabbath or undermine it?

Hebrews 4 is a compact, closely argued chapter that focuses on Sabbath rest. But before we look at the text of chapter 4, let’s do a quick overview of the chapter in light of the chapter title, “Jesus, Our Faithful Brother.”

The emphasis on Jesus as our “Faithful Brother” is based on Hebrews 2:11-12, 17. In 2:11-12 we read that Jesus was “not ashamed” to call us his brothers and sisters. Here is God incarnate, declaring that he is not “not ashamed” to call this race of rebels his brothers and sisters.

**Question:** Does it diminish the greatness of God to say that this great God is also our brother? What kind of conflicting emotions might that set up in our own hearts when we realize that our Creator and Redeemer did not hesitate to call this basket case of sordid humanity his brothers and sisters?

### Hebrews 4 and the Sabbath

**The Vocabulary of Rest.** Hebrews 3 and 4 place a heavy emphasis on the idea of “rest.” The primary noun in Greek is *katapausis*, which both in the NT and in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (= LXX) refers both to human rest and to divine rest.

**Question:** To what extent is the idea of “divine” rest not just a command, but an example for us?

**Comment:** In Genesis 2:1-3, where God establishes the Sabbath and blesses it, there is no command to keep the Sabbath holy. The divine example is given, which is what the author of Hebrews alludes to. God “rested” on the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3)

**Question:** Is the “rest” of Hebrews 4 something from the past or for the future or both?

**Comment:** Often in the New Testament, one hears an “already, but not yet,” reverberating in both background and foreground. “The kingdom of God is among you,” Jesus told the Pharisees when they asked him when the kingdom God would come (Luke 17:20-21). Yet in the Lord’s prayer we are invited to pray that the kingdom of God *will* come, clearly a future event.

Similarly, the idea of a rest is not only past and present, but also a future expectation. One does not have to choose. It is an already-but-not-yet reality.

**Another word for rest: *sabbatismos*.** In 4:9 Hebrews states: “a sabbath rest (*sabbatismos*) still remains for the people of God. That word is a brand new word, not found anywhere else in the New Testament or the literature of the first century (Johnsson, 95). Johnsson suggests “Sabbath-

like rest” or “Sabbath-ish rest.” there is no command, no argument. There is simply the presence of a “Sabbath-ish” rest. In light of the word usage, Johnsson includes this fascinating quote:

“In my judgment, Hebrews 4:1-11 gives us the strongest evidence in favor of the seventh-day Sabbath in the entire New Testament. Yet it does so without a direct appeal or invitation to keep the Sabbath. A direct appeal might suggest that the Hebrew Christians were debating which day to observe. But Hebrews introduces the Sabbath indirectly, in a non-defensive but highly positive manner. Our rest in Christ, says the author, has the *quality* of the Sabbath. It is *like* the Sabbath” – Johnsson, 96.

**Question:** What is the overall thrust of Hebrews 4?

**Comment:** However much we may focus on the Sabbath in Hebrews 4, the real focus is on the everlasting “today,” the opportunity to start again “today.” Israel failed to enter into rest. Can we likewise fail?

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme: “Jesus, the Giver of Rest**

**Leading Question:** Jesus said, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest.” Is it possible to find rest without coming to Jesus?

Jesus’ well-known rest invitation comes at the end of a record of tumultuous events. John the Baptist has been put in prison and Jesus pronounces strong judgment on some of the cities where he had been most active, including Capernaum. After all that, he “commands” the weary to come to him for rest.

**Question:** Does one need a command to come to Jesus? Does one need to come to Jesus in order to come to God?

**Comment:** This invitation to rest includes three commands: “Come,” “Take,” and “Learn.” These are all commands from Jesus. But what about those who don’t know about Jesus or about God? Note, for example, this Ellen White quote about the heathen who do not know about God, and this C. S. Lewis quote about Emeth, the worshiper of the pagan god Tash, who dies and finds himself in Aslan’s kingdom.

**Ellen White:** Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. – *Desire of Ages*, 638

**C. S. Lewis:** But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And

if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek. – C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 149

Both these quotations point to a God with wide-open arms for anyone who seeks to do what is right. These are not rebels, but they have not known about the God who revealed himself in Jesus.

**Question:** Matthew 11:29 refers to a “yoke.” How is his idea of a yoke positive or negative?

**Comment:** Galatians 5:1 uses the term yoke in a negative sense, “yoke of bondage.” Yet a well-fitting yoke also allows for a more productive life. Ideally, one becomes so “comfortable” in the yoke that one is hardly aware of it.

Tangentially related to the idea of a well-fitting yoke is the concept of freedom: discipline gives freedom. Tennis players know that if they want the ball to go where they hit it, they will need discipline.

C. S. Lewis suggests that the goal of all this is a certain independence.

He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys. – C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 39

The use of the phrase “law of liberty” in James 2:12 is also related to the need for discipline if one wants to be free. Finally, we should refer to that astonishing passage in Galatians 5:18: “If you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law.” This passage is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, a letter which is often used in a more libertarian way. Yet the works of the flesh listed in 5:19-21 indicate that Paul fully affirmed the value of “law”:

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,  
20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions,  
factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning  
you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the  
kingdom of God.

**Question:** How can a burden be “light,” as promised in Matthew 11:30.

**Comment:** A shared burden is a “light” burden. Moses’ father-in-law noted that he needed to “share” his burden with others (Exodus 18:13-22). A New Testament parallel is found in 1

Corinthians 12 with the metaphor of the “body of Christ”: the whole body works together in a way that virtually eliminates the burden because it is a shared burden.

**Question:** What does the repeated emphasis on “Today” suggest about the “point” of Hebrews 3-4?

**Comment:** Lurking behind the repeated references to “Today” is both a warning and an invitation. Which is more likely to touch the hearts of the readers?

**Theme: “Jesus the Faithful Priest”**

**Leading Question:** Roman Catholics regularly use priests in their worship; Protestants believe in the priesthood of all the believers. So how can Jesus as “High Priest” be meaningful to those who are not accustomed to priestly mediation?

**Comment:** The world of priestly mediation is a strange one for us. The overall message of the book of Hebrews is that through Jesus we have direct access to God. Somehow, saying that Jesus is our high priest is intended to help us get that message.

**Question:** Why did the author of Hebrews need to go through such elaborate arguments to establish that Jesus was a better high priest? Why couldn't he simply declare that Jesus gives us direct access to God, the message of 1 John 1:1-4?

**1 John 1:1-4:** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.

**Comment:** The life and teachings of Jesus asked a great deal from those who came from a Jewish background: The whole sacrificial system, the whole priestly ministry were to pass away, replaced by Jesus' ministry. Could it be that the book of Hebrews was intended to cushion the blow, to ease the transition?

### **Psalm 110**

Of the 10 so-called Royal Psalms ( 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, and 144:1-11), Psalm 110 was one of the most popular psalms for referring to Jesus the Priest-King. According the Scripture, the Old Testament priests came from the tribe of Levi and the royal figure from the tribe of Judah. But the book of Hebrews used the psalm for the purpose of showing that Jesus was someone who brought the two offices together. As noted in Psalm 110, and affirmed in the book of Hebrews, the royal figure found his priestly role through Melchizedek, not Levi.

**Question:** In Hebrews 6-8, the author of Hebrews pointedly describes Jesus' role as being better than anything that had gone before: he was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:20), and he was the mediator of a “better covenant” (Heb. 8:6-7). Indeed Hebrews 8:13 explicitly declares that the new covenant “has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete

and growing old will soon disappear.” Isn’t this rhetoric in Hebrews rather too critical of God-given laws and rituals?

**Question:** In what way is the priestly order of Melchizedek “better” than the Levitical priesthood?

**Question:** In what way is the “new covenant” better than the first one?

**In sum:** The book of Hebrews is not shy in declaring that everything about Jesus is better, an affirmation that we are entitled to make, too.

**Theme: “Jesus, the Anchor of the Soul”**

**Leading Question:** Can you point to a time in your life when Jesus was an “Anchor” of your soul?

**Comment:** The passage in Hebrews that refers to the “Anchor of the soul” is one that takes us to heavenly places where Jesus is a presence for us (Hebrews 6:19).

**Hebrews 6:16-20:** Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. 17 In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, 18 so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. 19 We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

**Comment:** The clear thrust of the passage is an experiential certainty which affirms Jesus’ ministry on our behalf. Is it possible to have this certainty within our heart without an explicit focus on Jesus heavenly ministry?

### **Hebrews 6:4: Restoration “impossible”?**

At a superficial level, three passages in Hebrews seem to exclude restoration after a fall:

6:4-6: Impossible to restore to repentance

10:26-31: No more sacrifice for sins

12:15-17 No chance to repent

Here we shall attempt to deal only with the first of these passages, but to do so in a way that may be helpful for the other two when we come to them. Typically this study guide uses the NRSV. But in this instance, the NKJV – and the KJV and several other translations – include an important “if”:

**Hebrews 6:4-12:**For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

7 For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears



herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; 8 but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.

9 But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner. 10 For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. 11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Johnsson (116-117) includes some helpful comments. Two paragraphs from p. 117 are included here:

First, we note that 6:4-6 comes in the middle of a sermonic application. While it contains theological elements, it is not part of a careful argument that seeks to spell out the nature of the “unpardonable sin.” Second, Paul specifically excludes his readers from among those who fall away from Christ. He says he is “persuaded [of] better things [concerning] you (6:9). Third, we note the *if* in verse 6 that puts the whole discussion on a conditional basis.

What Paul is presenting is a possibility rather than an actual situation. As we consider his strong words in light of the earlier applications (2:1-4; 3:1-4:13), we see that the scenario of 6:4-6 is the logical end result of the spiritual tendencies he sees among the Hebrews. Already they are in danger of drifting from the goal, of becoming hardened through sin’s deceitfulness. Already they have failed to grow into the stature the Lord intends for them. So because of present neglect of divine opportunities, they could – as unthinkable as it might seem – one day come to the point of outright, public rejection of the Lord.”

**Question:** The same passage that contains the dire warning against apostasy, also speaks warmly of that positive experience in which the believers were “enlightened,” had “tasted the heavenly gift,” “had shared in the Holy Spirit” and “tasted the goodness of the word of God” (4:4-5). Have you observed or experienced anything like that? – a mountaintop experience followed by a great crash?

**Question:** How can believers intervene when they sense that kind of crisis looming in a person’s experience?

**Question:** How are we to recognize the astonishing turn-around of those who were at risk of crucifying “again for themselves the Son of God,” and putting Him “to an open shame”? Here is the specific affirmation, this time from the NRSV (6:9-12):

**Hebrews 6:9-12:** Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. 10 For God is not

unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, 12 so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

**A Reminder.** As cited at the beginning of this week's lesson, Hebrews reminds the believers of what lies ahead:

**Hebrews 6:19-20:** We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

**Theme: “Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant”**

**Leading Question:** Is the covenant described in Hebrews 8 a brand new one, or a renewed covenant as it is Jeremiah 31?

Hebrews 8:8-12 is a straightforward quotation of the New Covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34. But by placing it in a new setting, Hebrews contrasts the Old and New covenants rather than seeing them as complementary. In short, Jeremiah breathes continuity and renewal, Hebrews announces contrast and obsolescence.

**Question:** Are there any clues in Hebrews that the author is taking a different approach than is found in Jeremiah?

**Hebrews 8:6-13:** But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

8 God finds fault with them when he says:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah;

9 not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors,  
on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of  
Egypt;

for they did not continue in my covenant,  
and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.

10 This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel  
after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their minds,  
and write them on their hearts,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.

11 And they shall not teach one another  
or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’  
for they shall all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest.

12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,  
and I will remember their sins no more.”

13 In speaking of “a new covenant,” he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

**Comment:** Heb. 8:8 uses the phrase: “God finds fault with them.” That is being true to both

contexts, – the fault was with the people, not with God or the covenant. Jeremiah says nothing about the covenant being a “better” covenant which makes the old one obsolete.

The Jeremiah passage is a promise to the people in Jeremiah’s day, before the incarnation, before Jesus came to earth as the Messiah. Apparently Hebrews was so concerned about putting the Levitical system to rest once and for all, that the author used strong language. Not only was this a better covenant, but the old one was made obsolete

When we interpret Scripture, it is essential to lay the differing passages side-by-side, not on top of each other. That way we can see how each passage addresses a particular context, a particular need.

### **Standing in the Sight of God Without a Mediator**

Within an Adventist context, a potentially problematic comment from Ellen White needs to be addressed when we talk about Jesus as mediator. In *The Great Controversy*, 425, Ellen White speaks of standing “in the sight of a holy God without a mediator.” When she penned those words, she clearly thought of them as a threat. But if we look at John 16:25-27, we see the possibility of transforming that threat into a promise:

**John 16:25-27:** “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. 26 On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; 27 for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”

The word *not* is the crucial one. Graham Maxwell loved to tell the story of an old-time evangelist who heard Maxwell speaking on the passage, and for the first time in his ministerial career heard the *not*. He jumped up out of his chair and exclaimed, “My whole life I have been using that text *without* the *not*!” Maxwell also tells about a 1971 paperback edition of *The Great Controversy* which omits the *not*.

If one is half asleep, either way sounds plausible: without the *not* the passage is more Pauline; with the *not* the passage is more Johannine. Here is the rendering of the key phrase with and without the *not*.

**Without the *not*:** “On that day you will ask in my name. I say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you.”

**With the *not*:** “On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself love you.”

At issue here are two different perspectives on the atonement, the “objective” atonement in which Jesus presents the believer to the Father; and the “subjective” atonement in which Jesus presents the Father to the believer. Both views are biblical and the believer should be free to choose the one that is most helpful.

The author of Hebrews emphasizes the positive role of the Mediator. I am convinced that as long as one needs a Mediator, Jesus is there to fill the need.

**Theme: “Jesus, the Perfect Sacrifice”**

**Leading Question:** “Why were sacrifices needed?”

Our leading question comes from one of the sections of the official study guide. And it triggers several more questions. And one of them focuses on the question of why sacrifices were necessary.

**Question:** Is it possible that sacrifices were not God’s idea in the first place?

**Comment:** One of the tantalizing verses of that great penitential Psalm, Psalm 51, suggests that animal sacrifices were, in fact, not God’s idea, certainly not his ideal:

**Psalm 51:15-17** Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.  
17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

In that connection it is worth noting the significance of an often overlooked verse in the book of Joshua:

**Joshua 24:2:** And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

Typically, devout conservatives tend to adopt a “once-true-always-true” perspective towards the words of Scripture. Thus whatever was spoken to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, is true for all time. But Joshua 24:2 suggests that Abraham knew very little about the what his forebears knew about God.

Another shocking realization is that when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he immediately set out to obey (see Genesis 22). That could have been because child sacrifice had come to be seen as *the* ultimate gift to the gods. On Mt. Moriah, God intervened at the last moment and said, in effect, “It’s good that you were willing to sacrifice Isaac. But the bigger truth is that you can’t sacrifice your son. That is only something I can do. I will provide the sacrifice. There it is behind you.” And so the ram was sacrificed in place of Isaac, a foreshadowing of what God would do in Jesus Christ on Golgotha.

This whole story only makes sense in light of the great struggle between Christ and Satan, a struggle which culminates in war in heaven where Michael and the Dragon are locked in mortal conflict (see Revelation 12:7-12). I have sketched the outline of this conflict in a chapter in my little book, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* “Behold it was very good, and then it all turned sour.”

If that model is correct, then all kinds of mayhem could have broken loose between the Fall and the call of Abraham. The master plot suggests that God stepped back from more direct involvement in the affairs of planet earth, thus allowing Satan (the serpent, the dragon) the opportunity to show the universe the great advantages of selfishness (his way) to self-sacrificing love (God's way).

With Abraham, God returns to more direct involvement with humankind. But during the interim, the Dragon had a great deal of freedom. And one of the lies that he perpetrated that animal sacrifice, and ultimately human sacrifice, were demanded by God. Psalm 51:15-17 reflects the divine reaction to sacrifice, a reaction that reaches its climax in Jesus' death on the cross, a once-for-all sacrifice that would forever bring sacrifice to an end.

The book of Hebrews focuses sharply on that once-for-all blood sacrifice as a means of bringing all other sacrifices to an end. But not all biblical authors give that same emphasis.

**Question:** Is cleansing from impurity, a universal concern?

**Comment:** Johnsson (p. 167) cites this statement from the French scholar Paul Ricoeur:

“The French scholar Paul Ricoeur has traced the language of confession among the peoples of the world. He finds that the most basic confession, reducible to no other, is: I am dirty; I need cleansing from God”

But this statement needs to be balanced by the almost hedonistic experience of the author of Ecclesiastes. *The New Living Translation* renders Eccl. 3:11-13 as follows:

**Eccl. 3:11-13:** Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. 12 So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. 13 And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God.

Perhaps if Ricoeur had read Ecclesiastes, he would have been less sweeping in his estimate of the human felt-need for cleansing.

**Question:** Is there room within Christianity for the almost hedonistic perspective of Ecclesiastes, a book that is light years removed from the book of Hebrews?

**Comment:** The famous evangelical cult expert, Walter Martin would certainly want to see Ecclesiastes as out of bounds. Here is his quote from his book, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists* (1960, p. 127, note #11):

“It is almost universally agreed among Biblical scholars that Ecclesiastes portrays Solomon's apostasy and is therefore virtually worthless for determining doctrine. It sketches man's 'life under the sun' and reveals the hopelessness of the soul apart from God. The conclusion of the Book alone mirrors the true revelation of God (chap. 12).”

**Question:** Is it possible to conceive Christianity without reference to blood?

**Comment:** Ecclesiastes would certainly shrug of any idea of blood in a religious sense. But another line of devout believers want to eliminate any reference to blood. "Power in the Blood"? Anathema. These are believers who are very much apposed to the idea of substitutionary atonement. Their perspective can be seen in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) and in John 14-17. But the blood is not only present in Scripture, in some books it is actually emphasized. Certainly in Romans 8 and in the whole book of Hebrews would fit into that category.

**Question:** Is it possible to postpone to 1844 the great antitypical day of atonement where Jesus' blood is applied?

**Comment:** The New Testament books certainly do not foresee a long delay before judgment and second advent. And this quote from EGW (*Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, 66-67) includes NT citations as evidence that the New Testament writers expected the advent in their day:

A statement published in 1851 in *Experience and Views*, and found on page 49 [page 58, present edition] of *Early Writings* is quoted as proving my testimonies false:

67

"I saw that the time for Jesus to be in the most holy place was nearly finished, and that time can last but a very little longer." {1SM 66.6}

As the subject was presented before me, the period of Christ's ministration seemed almost accomplished. Am I accused of falsehood because time has continued longer than my testimony seemed to indicate? How is it with the testimonies of Christ and His disciples? Were they deceived? {1SM 67.1}

Paul writes to the Corinthians: {1SM 67.2}

"But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not" (1 Corinthians 7:29, 30). {1SM 67.3}

Again, in his epistle to the Romans, he says: {1SM 67.4}

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light" (Romans 13:12). {1SM 67.5}

And from Patmos, Christ speaks to us by the beloved John: {1SM 67.6}

"Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (Revelation 1:3). "The Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly; blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (Revelation 22:6, 7). {1SM 67.7}

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional."

In short, one finds within the community of believers several different perspectives, all of which need to have a place at the table:

- 1) Those who insist on a strong emphasis on the blood of Christ.
- 2) Those like the author of Ecclesiastes who have no interest in blood or impurity.
- 3) Those who want to banish blood completely, as in the story of Prodigal and in John 14-17.
- 4) Those who want to postpone the blood reckoning until 1844.
- 5) Finally, those who want to ignore Hebrews in the name of simplicity.

**Question:** Is it possible for children, the illiterate, the low IQ to understand the book of Hebrews? Or should we, like Jesus, seek to simplify the message so that anyone can understand. In that sense, Jesus' simple summary is the key:

**Matthew 7:12:** "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

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Chapter 2, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?*  
By Alden Thompson  
[Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2011]

**Behold it was very good and then  
it all turned sour**

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. – Genesis 1:31

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth.... – Genesis 6:5

When I step back and try to picture the sweep of the entire Old Testament, and, in fact, of the whole Bible, I see something very similar to the scene suggested by the chapter title: a glorious idea that has somehow gone terribly wrong. I would hasten to add, however, that for all the wrongness and evil to which the Bible testifies, a generous portion of good still remains. And what is more, out of the wreckage of this beautiful creation God has conceived something even more beautiful and awe-inspiring: a plan of redemption, a theme that we shall look at more closely in chapter 7.

Because the Bible presents such an intricate tapestry, woven with the evil as well as the good, the horrible as well as the magnificent, a distorted view of the whole is quite possible. In fact, Christians have often shown a tendency to focus on one element or the other. Some have so greatly praised their Maker that they have neglected to take seriously the tragic consequences of sin. On the other hand, some have been so deeply scarred by sorrow and tragedy, that even the glories of a this-worldly sunset can scarcely quench the longing for a better world. The difference between these two emphases can be clearly seen in the contrasting hymn titles: "This is my Father's world" yet "I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home."

Any alert citizen of planet earth can testify that life is composed of the bitter and the sweet, the good and the bad, but it is a rarer gift to be able to enjoy this world while longing for a better one. To claim that this world is absolutely filthy is false. Nor can any sober person say that this little corner of the universe is a beauty spot which has no rival. For the Christian, a balanced view is vital: the thorns must



not be allowed to ruin the roses, nor should the roses obscure the thorns. That is a principle which is significant not only for daily living, but equally for understanding the Old Testament.

In Chapter 1, I noted briefly that one can use two rather different emphases in interpreting the Old Testament: the “high road” approach and the “low road.” “High road” refers to an emphasis on the “goodness” in the Old Testament, particularly in the lives of the men of God. The most straightforward example of this approach is found in Hebrews 11 where men of great variety and diverse experiences are all marked with the label “faith.” By contrast, “low road” refers to the approach which calls attention to the great depths to which humans had fallen, including those people that God claimed as his own.

Because the “low road” approach has been so helpful in enabling me to come to grips with the Old Testament, I tend to emphasize that way of reading the biblical accounts. The “high road” has marvelous potential for immediate inspiration, and perhaps that is why it has tended to predominate in Christian circles. But such an approach does not really prepare one for actually reading the Old Testament stories. In other words, one could become so accustomed to a “high road” diet that reading the Old Testament itself could lead to indigestion! I think that both approaches are possible and useful, yet in actual practice it is difficult to follow them both with equal enthusiasm.

Perhaps one reason why the “low road” approach has been neglected stems from the recognition that the discovery of the shadow side of the Old Testament characters has not always produced positive results. In fact, the sins of the saints have often been turned against Scripture and its God and have been used as weapons to attack the authority of the Word of God. Nevertheless, the “low road” approach is in some ways a two-edged sword which can cut either way. For example, one could turn to any nineteenth century devotional writer who is defending the Bible against its detractors. To the statement, “If your God condones things like that, then I want no part of your religion,” he can answer, “But it is precisely that point that vindicates the word of God, for here we have a realistic picture of fallen humanity accompanied by a picture of a God who stoops to help.” So what is taken as a great hindrance to faith by one man is seen as a pillar of faith by another. The psychological and sociological reasons behind those two opposite reactions to the same evidence are undoubtedly complex and cannot be explored here. But I do think it is important to recognize that there is much in the Old Testament that offends refined tastes. When we ignore those aspects, we lay the groundwork for the loss of faith. We must take them seriously and show how God can bring about his purposes even out of that kind of situation.

The “high road” approach has often led to the aggravation of one more point of tension in the interpretation of the Old Testament, namely, that between those who see the religious experience of the Old Testament as evolving naturally, and those who see it as stemming from divine revelation. Much of the modern scholarly study of the Old Testament is based on the assumption that every aspect of man’s experience is evolving, following principles of natural development. In such circles, then, it has become quite standard procedure to describe Old Testament people as developing from the primitive towards the sophisticated, from superstitious beliefs to a mature, intelligent faith. In accordance with such a scheme, those parts of the Old Testament judged to be primitive are said to be most ancient, whereas the more “developed” parts of scripture are said to be of later origin. Thus the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, for example, are said to be early and primitive because God is depicted very much like a man: he walks in the garden, forms man of the dust of the earth, he operates on Adam and builds Eve. By contrast, Genesis 1 is said to be the very latest (and greatest) theology in the Old Testament, written towards the end of the Old Testament period, because God is depicted as transcendent, quite removed from the mundane affairs of life; he creates by his word and does not get his “hands” dirty with the dust of man’s creation.

## A PARTIAL REVELATION OF GOD

Such an approach to the Old Testament has often been so completely foreign to conservative Christians that we have failed to take it as a serious effort to explain some difficult aspects of the Old

Testament. Conservative Christians have often tended simply to quote the New Testament view of the Old Testament and to use the “high road” approach for purposes of affirming faith in God and in his word without seriously attempting to explain the Old Testament. The specter of an evolutionary approach to the Old Testament has often made it impossible for conservative Christians even to listen to scholarly discussions about the Old Testament, to say nothing of actually participating in the dialogue.

At the risk of sounding terribly conservative to some of my scholarly friends and dangerously liberal to some of my conservative friends, I would like to propose, as a first step towards understanding the Old Testament, that we simply accept the scheme of “history” which the Old Testament itself suggests. I don’t think that is asking too much, regardless of whether one assumes a scholarly or a devotional approach to the Old Testament, or whether one happens to be liberal or conservative.

Now if we do let the Old Testament speak for itself, a rather surprising picture emerges; surprising, at least, for one who has been accustomed to taking an exclusively “high road” approach to the Old Testament. Perhaps a brief summary can serve as an outline of the discussion which follows:

1. God creates a perfect world and calls it good (Genesis 1).
2. Man exercises his free will to turn against God. (Genesis 2-3).
3. After the “fall,” God’s beautiful world is marred by repeated outbreaks of sin and tragedy:
  - A. Cain murders his brother (Gen. 4:1-16)
  - B. Cain’s line develops into a hateful and hated race (Gen. 4:17-24)
  - C. Noah’s generation rebels, leading to the Flood (Gen. 6-8)
  - D. Noah’s son Ham mocks his father (Gen. 9:20-28)
  - E. The Tower of Babel shows humanity as still being rebellious (Gen. 11).
  - F. Abraham’s own family worships other gods (Josh. 24:2)
4. With Abraham, God begins a fresh attempt to reveal himself to mankind, to people who now know very little of God’s plan (Genesis 12).

This prologue to the Old Testament is extremely important for understanding what follows, for it sets the stage for all the degenerate and “primitive” acts which follow. Beginning with Abraham, God seeks to reestablish his way in human hearts, hearts which have fallen far from the natural purity and knowledge of the first human pair.

Now right at this point I would like to note a more serious problem that arises out of the “high road” emphasis, namely, the assumption that virtually the full content of the “gospel” was both known and essentially preserved from the time of creation through the line of the “sons of God” (the patriarchal line). Whatever the reasons for that view, it causes real problems when one observes the behavior and ethical standards held at various points throughout the Old Testament period. Christians have always claimed that what one believes about God has a direct impact on the way one lives. In other words, good theology leads to a noble life. If that principle holds true, as I think it must if Christian theology is to make any sense at all, then how could it be that the Old Testament saints had in their possession virtually the complete “gospel” while their behavior falls far short of such a theology? All the evidence from Genesis suggests that Abraham did not consider it wrong to take a second wife. His loss of faith was wrong, something that he himself came to realize according to the Genesis story. But the principle of polygamy is never discussed. In the Jacob story it is even more evident that polygamy is an accepted way of life. By reading between the lines in the light of later Christian standards we can certainly surmise the tragedies caused by polygamy, but Genesis does not moralize about it. To cite further examples, Exodus does not moralize about slavery, nor does the Old Testament grant an “enlightened” status to women.

This tension between theology and ethics evaporates if we read the Old Testament in its original setting and do not insist on finding full-blown New Testament standards everywhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament itself contrasts the many and various ways of the Old Testament with the way of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2) and speaks of the shadow pointing to the reality (Heb. 10:1). Perhaps we could even borrow another famous New Testament phrase: “seeing through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). A type is never as clear as the reality, nor is the shadow as clear as the subject itself. Why then should we insist that the Old Testament be as clear as the New in its picture of God? For all practical purposes, the New Testament contradicts the claim of a complete Old Testament revelation while confirming that the Old Testament believer had quite adequate evidence on which to base faith (cf. John 5:46-47).

The point of all this is to emphasize that if one is going to understand the Old Testament, one must let the Old Testament speak for itself, something which conservative Christians have had considerable difficulty in doing.

Returning then to our survey of the Old Testament story, I would like to suggest, in keeping with the evidence from Genesis, that Abraham’s actual knowledge about God was most likely quite limited. He was a great man of faith who acted on the evidence which he had. And though his knowledge of God was limited, and though he was occasionally unfaithful to that knowledge, he rightly stands as one of the great heroes of faith. The story in Genesis 22 of his willingness to offer up Isaac, the son of promise, stands out as one of the great testimonies to his relationship with his God. Yet right here within this great story of Abraham’s faith lies a problem for us if we take the “high road” approach. Biblical narratives detailing the later history of God’s people clearly establish that human sacrifice was forbidden. If Abraham already knew that such “killing” was wrong, then why should we commend his faith for his willingness to do what he believed to be wrong? Such an approach puts Abraham and us in an inconsistent position. What would hinder God from coming to me now and asking me to “sacrifice” my child? And how would I know that it was the voice of God if he had clearly indicated to me by other means that such sacrifice was wrong? Would he expect me to disobey him in order to obey him? Not at all.

The explanation lies in the recognition that Abraham was most likely surrounded by a culture which assumed that the sacrifice of the heir was the highest possible gift that one could offer to the gods. It was only that cultural background which made that particular test possible. But interestingly enough, if we interpret the story rather freely, we find in it the very heart of the gospel story, for, in effect, God comes to Abraham and tells him: “Abraham, I appreciate your willingness, but you really cannot offer your son. Only I can offer my son. I will provide the sacrifice – there it is behind you.” Is that not what God says at the cross? “No merely human sacrifice can ever be adequate – I will provide the gift that brings peace.” Did Abraham see the full story? Through a glass darkly, yes, but probably not in detail. I think that is the message of Genesis 22.

A great number of perplexities that crop up in connection with the patriarchs simply vanish when we recognize that these men had entered a world that had been greatly distorted by sin so much so that the truths which God had originally entrusted to the human family had disappeared or had become greatly distorted by contact with pagan culture. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how an original promise of a Messiah who must die for our sins could have become distorted into the practice of human sacrifice. No proof can be cited for such a development, of course, but such a possibility would certainly be in keeping with the known human tendency to transform the gift of God into a matter of our own works and pride.

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD: RISE AND FALL

If we follow the Old Testament story further, we note that the period of drastic loss of the

knowledge of God highlighted in Genesis 3-11 is not the only one of decline and degeneracy. The descendants of Jacob migrated to Egypt where they became enslaved for hundreds of years. The biblical account makes it clear that when the time came for God to deliver “his” people, their spiritual condition was low indeed. While the knowledge of God had not been completely lost, the book of Exodus does suggest that most of the people had virtually lost sight of the God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No wonder Moses’ position as leader of these people was often quite tenuous; they were always on the verge of deserting this “new” God for the old ones of Egypt. And when this rough lot of ex-slaves finally arrived at Sinai, the laws which God gave through Moses provide clear evidence that these people, cowering in mixed fear and awe about the mountain, were so deeply involved with cruel customs that instant abolition of such customs was out of the question. The best that could be done in some instances was a slight “humanizing” of some of the more barbaric aspects. And I use the term “humanizing” intentionally, for I think the laws of the Pentateuch must be seen, in the first instance, as revealing the kind of people God was dealing with, and then only in the second instance, as revealing the character of the God who had chosen these people. The thunder and smoke, the heavy hand, and the strange customs seen at Sinai, are often cited by God’s detractors as evidence against him. Because of the “high road” approach, many Christians also find these aspects troublesome even though they choose for other reasons to remain within the community of faith.

Later Old Testament writers make it clear that when human beings forget God, they also forget their fellow creatures, sinking to cruelty and abuse. So when God seeks to awaken a knowledge of himself in the hearts of people thus degraded and alienated from him, he does not seek simply to make them more “religious,” but also to make them more human. Judged by the cultures around ancient Israel, the laws given to Israel show remarkable signs of “humanization.” God took this people, in spite of the many barbaric and cruel customs which they had adopted and began to draw them to him. He wished to show them a better way. But if human beings are to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, then the “better way” must come gradually. Otherwise, they will exercise their freedom of choice and turn away from that which they do not understand. I shall return to this point later, for it is a crucial one, but now I simply want to make clear the “rise and fall” of God’s people as the Old Testament itself describes it. Up to the time of the Exodus, it is mostly “fall,” and that is why the “low road” approach can be so helpful.

Before taking up the question as to why God allowed man to fall so low, I should perhaps draw attention briefly to some other “low” points in the progression of the Old Testament narrative. Have you read the book of Judges lately? Maybe you haven’t been brave enough. In chapter 6 we will discuss in some detail one of the frightful stories at the end of the book of Judges, but the whole of that period is one of apostasy, rebellion, and degeneration with very few glimmers of light. If unstable characters such as Samson and Jephthah were the best that God could find for his judges, you can imagine the condition of the rest of the people. At the beginning of the settlement period, even that fine young man Joshua, one who generally occupies a position of honor on the “high road,” sometimes acts in a shocking manner, at least when judged by our standards of right and wrong. Take the story in Joshua 10 as an example. When five Canaanite kings had been captured, Joshua commanded his men of war: “Put your feet on the necks of these kings.” With a few words about the Lord’s continuing presence and assistance, he then killed the kings and hung the corpses on five trees until sundown (Josh. 10:22-27). What would a modern Christian church do with a military leader who treated his enemies in such a way? Reflection on such questions simply emphasizes how far these great men of ages past were from holding the kinds of standards that we would consider right. Yet these were God’s men and God chose to use them. What does that tell us about God? Either that God is very cruel – or that he is very patient. I much prefer the latter alternative, for that is the kind of God I find revealed in Jesus Christ. With that deep Christian bias which I readily admit, I choose the alternative which best fits the larger picture.

Glimpses of two other periods in the history of Israel should be sufficient to give at least the

flavor of the Old Testament story. The key names are Hezekiah and Josiah during the period of the monarchy, and Ezra and Nehemiah from the post-exilic period. During the approximately four hundred years of Israel's monarchy, her religious experience was wildly erratic. Some great and good names do stand out, including those of Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom initiated great religious reforms. Hezekiah's reform and Passover preceded Josiah's by about eighty years and are described at some length in 2 Chronicles 29-31. Why does the Chronicler give this story so much space? Perhaps because in Hezekiah's day, the Passover was quite a novel idea, so novel, in fact, that the priests could not consecrate themselves in time. Levites had to be drafted to help administer the sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:34). The Passover itself had to be delayed for a month so that everything could be done as the law required. The people were so taken with this "new" thing that everyone agreed to extend the feast for another seven days (2 Chron. 30:23).

Now one might think that such a glorious Passover would establish the pattern for generations to come, but how does the biblical record describe conditions when Josiah came to power a few decades later? The Chronicler's detailing of Josiah's own development is most illuminating and deserves a closer look.

As told in 2 Chronicles 34, Josiah's religious experience grew as follows: he was only a lad of eight when he began to reign (v. 1), but he apparently did not begin to "seek the God of David" until he was sixteen (v. 3). What had he been doing for religion before this? Use your imagination. The Bible doesn't say. After *beginning* to seek the God of David at the age of sixteen, he finally decided to do something concrete to establish the faith; he began to break down the idols and destroy the pagan altars, but that didn't actually take place until he was twenty (vv. 3-7). One would think that by now he must have been a devout worshiper of the true God and would have had most aspects of the faith firmly under control. Not quite, for it was only when he was twenty-four years of age that he decided to restore the temple, the official place of worship (v. 8). While the temple renewal was underway, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law (v. 14). The Bible itself does not clearly identify the book that was found, but many scholars think it was the book of Deuteronomy or at least part of it. In any event, Hilkiah brought the book to the king's secretary who in turn rushed it to the king. Whatever the precise contents may have been, the king was greatly surprised and shocked (v. 19). Can you imagine both the priest and the king being ignorant of the book of the law – and that so soon after Hezekiah's great reform? And if the king and priest were ignorant, what was the condition of the average citizen?

I can well remember my reaction when the events of 2 Chronicles 34 finally made an impression on my mind. My "high road" picture of faithful kings, priests, and prophets, who held high the "banner of truth," needed to be remodeled to fit the picture that the Old Testament itself gives. What a struggle it was for God to reveal himself to those people, people who so easily and so quickly fell so far.

Our last snapshot picture from the Old Testament comes after Israel had been dragged into Babylonian captivity, the just reward for her sins as the biblical account so dearly states. Nebuchadnezzar's final capture and destruction of Jerusalem is usually dated at 586; the first feeble group of returning exiles apparently headed back for Judah in 536, but morale was a problem. After a half-hearted attempt to rebuild the city and the temple, local opposition discouraged the people and they simply let the temple remain in ruins. Finally, around 520, under the inspiration provided by the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, a drive was begun which resulted in the completion of the temple.

We have no biblical narrative which describes what took place during the next few decades. All we know from the biblical account is that when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458/57, the state of religion was appalling. He and Nehemiah worked together to restore the city walls and the faith of the people. But a most sobering insight is provided by the last chapter of Nehemiah. Ezra had now passed from the scene and Nehemiah has had to return to the court of the Persian king, though the biblical account does not explain why. Upon his return to Jerusalem some twelve years later, which would probably be no earlier than 425, Nehemiah was appalled by the conditions he found. Some of the very reforms that he

and Ezra had established earlier had been reversed entirely. Read the story yourself in Nehemiah 13 and you will discover further evidence of the “low road” on which Israel so often traveled! In Nehemiah’s absence, the people had given over part of the temple to one of Israel’s avowed enemies, Tobiah the Ammonite; the priests and Levites had simply been left to fend for themselves; the Sabbath had been disregarded; and the Israelites were still marrying foreign wives, contrary to God’s law. That last point was precisely one that Ezra and Nehemiah had “reformed” earlier.

Nehemiah’s response to this multiple threat was vigorous and passionate. In his own words: “I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God” (Neh. 13:25). Tough lines, but perhaps not too surprising considering the circumstances.

Descriptions of the history of Israel often suggest that the Babylonian captivity cured Israel once and for all of the worship of pagan deities and turned her to the religion of law, an emphasis that is altogether too clear by New Testament times. But even that religion of law was not easy to come by. The evidence from the Old Testament suggests that virtually throughout her history, even after the exile, God’s people were mostly traveling the “low road.” One could hardly accuse Israel of worshipping God wrongly when she was not even worshipping Him at all! But that must have been the case more often than we have been inclined to admit.

After tracing the above scenario, we must now ask the question as to why God would allow such frightful degeneration. Why would he create a world and then let it slide away from him? Why would he choose a people and then not keep them close to him? Those questions have often been asked and they are the right ones to ask. The problem of evil and sin is an ominous cloud over our world. When God’s children either cannot recognize or cannot understand his activity among men, they turn away from him. I do not presume to know the full answer, but I would like to suggest a way of interpreting God’s activity that has helped me to see the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of a consistent revelation of a good God.

## A COSMIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

The claim of both the Old Testament and of the New is that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and the source of everything good. How could such a God be the architect of this world with its sin and tragedy? The Bible does not really attempt to answer that question in a philosophical manner, but there are some hints in Scripture that point in the direction of a possible explanation of the course that this world has taken. When these hints are drawn together, a picture of a great cosmic drama begins to emerge. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the best known popularization of this drama, but the elements are present in Scripture, and Milton himself draws heavily on scriptural imagery. As the writings of C.S. Lewis attest, the motif is still popular in our modern era.

The drama centers on the great struggle between good and evil, between God and the Enemy of the good. The Old Testament treatment of this drama will be discussed more specifically in the next chapter, but the hints appear very early in the biblical narrative. The serpent of Genesis 3, although more crafty than any of God’s other creatures, is somehow also God’s opponent, raising questions about God’s manner of dealing with man. He claims that God arbitrarily has withheld something good from man. Traditional Christianity has attributed personal qualities to this serpent and has depicted him as the Great Opponent of God, usually under the name of Satan or simply the Devil.

The suggestion of a great cosmic struggle between this Adversary and God is further amplified in the book of Job. The Adversary accuses God of favoritism, implying that God virtually has bribed Job to serve him; remove the hedge and Job’s allegiance would simply evaporate. In short, the book of Job sets a drama in which the Adversary attacks the very heart of God’s ways with man. If God is to prove his case, he must throw his man Job to the lions, so to speak. Job suffers, argues, talks back to a silent God,

but never abandons his faith in God's justice. Thus, through Job's endurance, God's character stands vindicated.

Two additional Old Testament passages, Isaiah 14: 12-15, the famous "Lucifer" passage, and Ezekiel 28:11-19, both suggest further elements in the traditional Christian interpretation of the cosmic struggle. In particular, the aspect of selfish pride is prominent in both of these passages. It requires only a small step to arrive at the two great points of tension in this cosmic drama: the selfishness and pride of the Adversary over against God's self-sacrificing love, a contrast that has been much developed in the Christian understanding of the mission of Jesus.

The New Testament intensifies the focus on this cosmic drama. When the "seventy" returned from their successful mission, Luke records that Jesus exclaimed: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). In addition, both Matthew and Luke record the personal confrontation between Jesus and the Adversary (Matthew 4; Luke 4). Both accounts hint at a cosmic significance when the devil offers the world to Jesus if he will fall down and worship him.

Much additional New Testament evidence could be cited, but for purposes of defining the cosmic struggle, the final book of the New Testament is one of the more important New Testament points of reference. Revelation 12-14, and 20, in particular, throw the struggle into bold relief; the dragon and Michael are at war (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is defeated and cast to earth where he pursues those who are faithful to God's commands (Rev. 12:17). The dragon carries on his warfare through the beast of Revelation 13. The beast and his allies attack virtually every part of God's realm. As the struggle climaxes, its religious character becomes more evident, for another beast follows in the authority of the first, demanding that all should *worship* the image of the beast or be killed (Rev. 13:15). Thus the human family is inevitably drawn into the struggle. Those who refuse the demands of the beast are described as saints who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

Throughout the book of Revelation the theme of judgment is prominent, a judgment which is ultimately for God and his holy ones and against the dragon and his demons. Revelation 14:6 declares that the hour of judgment has come and in the chapter which describes the final demise of the devil and his angels, Revelation 20, judgment is committed to the saints (Rev. 20:4). The language of confrontation simply dominates the book.

Now it is perhaps noteworthy that where this cosmic struggle is given any kind of content, the enemy accuses God of being arbitrary: in Genesis 3, God is accused of arbitrarily withholding something good from man. In Job, God is accused of arbitrarily favoring Job. Yet interestingly enough, these same passages suggest that God actually grants remarkable freedom: in Genesis, the power of choice and the right to rebel; in Job, the right of the Adversary to viciously attack Job, Job's family, and Job's possessions. In short, the biblical writers seem to present the evidence for a freedom-loving God who has no fears of granting freedom also to his creatures and even to the Adversary himself. But in the context of the great cosmic struggle, when the Adversary accuses God of being arbitrary, the only possible way of putting the accusation to rest is for God to do precisely what he did in Job's case: he must throw Job to the lions. Refusal to let Satan attack Job would simply have left the accusation all the more believable, and the reputation of God's government all the more in doubt. But now let us apply the above suggestions to the interpretation of biblical history as a whole. If the course of history can be seen to be taking place within a great cosmic struggle in which God is accused of governing in an arbitrary manner, then we have a hint as to how we might understand his willingness to create a good world – but then watch it fall into serious decay. Who would be the mastermind of that decay? The Adversary.

The suggestion that the Adversary is in some sense the master of this world as well as the mastermind behind its pain and agony, appears in the book of Job. At least when the sons of God gathered together, the Adversary reported that he had come from the earth. This may also be the origin of the references in the gospels to "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). The devil's willingness to "concede" rulership to Jesus (for a price!) as noted in the temptation accounts also implies a certain

demonic lordship over creation. Placing this demonic control in a framework similar to that provided by the book of Job, we can imagine that a good world has been thrown to the lions. Thus, the entire creation must endure a Job-like experience at the hands of the Adversary.

If God's ultimate authority is to be established, then the full impact of demonic rule must be allowed to develop. The "benefits" and "blessings" of demonic rule must be allowed to develop for all to see, if God's lordship is to be finally regained. So just as God had to remain silent during Job's agony, just as he allowed Satan to destroy Job's innocent children, just as God allowed circumstances to deteriorate to the point where Job's wife could say: "Curse God and die," so it is with the world which God has created. Demonic forces must be granted the right to rule. Man must be granted the right to rebel without the threat of immediate and sudden punishment. And so we have the tragic sequence of Genesis 3-11, a somber reminder of the devastation caused by rebellion, but at the same time, a testimony to a God who loves freedom so much that he even grants us the privilege of ruining our lives and the lives of others.

Yet God has not abdicated completely his responsibilities and control. Just as he set limits on Satan's attack on Job, so he has put some limits on the spread of evil. And just as God finally broke his silence with Job, so he also came in a special way to Abraham to renew the knowledge of God and to lead Abraham into a new relationship as an example of what a divine-human relationship could mean. But if God is the kind of God who loves freedom, then he cannot force us to grow towards him. Growth can come only as we choose to respond to the divine invitation. That is why the Old Testament stories provide such a mysterious blending of good and evil. In some of the narratives the distinction between good and evil is clear enough: human beings simply failed, revolting against what they knew to be right. But in other cases, divine wisdom apparently saw that man was not yet ready for the next step upward. Reforms cannot be hasty, otherwise all can be lost. For freedom's sake, God had been willing to let the demons have a fair crack at his creation; now God must defeat the demons, the false deities who had inundated the earth.

If we apply this suggested interpretative framework to Abraham's situation, we can see that if God had moved too quickly in his attempt to win the heart of Abraham, Abraham would have had plenty of other "gods" to choose from. He was by no means bound to serve the God who had called him from Ur of the Chaldees. There must have been many things that God desperately wanted to tell Abraham, but he didn't dare. Abraham was not yet ready to move from milk to meat!

Thus when the larger picture of a cosmic struggle forms the background of the Old Testament, I find it much easier to understand the activities of God. It now seems strange to me that the Old Testament God has the reputation of having a short fuse. A God of incredible patience is a much more accurate description. Judged by New Testament standards, life in the Old Testament was often at a very low ebb. Yet God was there – working, inviting, winning.

We must not assume, however, that the upward path was a continuous one once God had come to Abraham. The graph actually looks much more like a roller-coaster ride! Freedom means we may grow or fall, depending on whether we respond to the divine invitation or turn from it. When one of God's children chooses to turn away, the memory of the divine presence can very easily fade completely. Very little time is required to obliterate even important traditions from the human experience. I have known families who have become alienated from the Christian community and have turned away, taking their children with them into isolation. Given a few years of such isolation, the children have no memory of that which had at one time been so important to their parents. So it is with the rebellions and apostasies in the Old Testament. The example cited earlier of the loss of the knowledge of God between Hezekiah and Josiah is almost the rule rather than the exception, more typical than remarkable, though still very much a tragedy.

To summarize the argument of this chapter, we can say that God did create a good world. In this world he placed free creatures. They chose to rebel and align themselves with the Adversary. His attacks



on God set the stage for demonic rule, a rule which a freedom-loving God chose to allow as necessary evidence in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The Old Testament gives ample evidence of the impact of the demonic rule. At the same time, however, it testifies to God's patient interest in his own people, a people through whom he hoped to demonstrate to the world that there is a God in heaven who is the source of everything good. God had much that he wanted to show and tell his people. As soon as they were ready, he passed on the good news. The tragedy was that they were so seldom ready. Yet God was still willing to watch and wait. That is the glory of the Old Testament and the glory of our God.

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: “Jesus Opens the Way Through the Veil”

**Leading question:** Is there more than one way to find full and direct access to God?

**Comment:** From the perspective of Hebrews, *the* way to find access to God is through the veil with Jesus. The result is stated in the memory text for today’s lesson:

**Hebrews 9:24:** For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

The author of Hebrews trumpets the amazing truth which he has experienced: Jesus gives direct access to God. As noted in last week’s study, however, there are several ways in which we can find access to God. Some, like the author of Ecclesiastes, simply don’t worry about access. They revel in the goodness of God’s gift and rejoice. But this week’s emphasis is on the access which Jesus’ sacrifice gifts to those who believe in him.

**Question:** How does one overcome the fear that devout people sense when they think of coming into God’s presence?

**Comment:** Some believers, like the author of Ecclesiastes, sense no fear at the thought of coming into God’s presence. But some believers sense great fear at the thought of coming into his presence. For the author of Hebrews, relying on the blood of Jesus is the antidote. And interestingly enough, the book of Hebrews actually magnifies the fear – before offering the antidote in Jesus. Note these words from Hebrews 12:18-29:

**Hebrews 12:18-29:** You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that

is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

**Comment:** A veil can serve in two different ways, sometimes overlapping each other in purpose: Protection and Boundary. Ancient Israel had tougher boundaries and strong warnings. As Hebrews 12:21 declared, “Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’” And Israel declared their great fear, as well. After the second giving of the law in Deuteronomy 5, this is the dialogue that Scripture records:

**Deut. 5:22-23:** These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. 23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; 24 and you said, “Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. 25 So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? 27 Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it.”

28 The Lord heard your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me: “I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. 29 If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever! 30 Go say to them, ‘Return to your tents.’ 31 But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.” 32 You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. 33 You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess.

Israel was so frightened that they asked Moses to be a mediator for them. Indeed, that mode of indirect communication was typical of the Old Testament. Note how the Aaronic blessing is framed:

**Numbers 6:22-27:** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 23 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,  
24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.  
27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Note that the people were three steps removed from God: God to Moses to Aaron to the people. By contrast, in Jesus there was unmediated proximity. Not only did Jesus (God!) take the children in his arms (Mark 9:36; 10:16), the apostles celebrated the believer's freedom to touch and handle him. The first lines of 1 John 1 give us a vivid record:

**1 John 1:1-4:** We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

We should also note, however, that sometimes a believer could be overwhelmed by Jesus' presence and actions. Even though his actions or words were not "fearful," they still triggered a sense of awe, and a felt need to put some distance between the human and the divine. Perhaps the most striking account is Peter's reaction after the miraculous catch of fish. In the classic words of the KJV: "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord'" (Luke 5:5)

On balance, our God wants us to find rest in his presence. The description of the New Earth and the New Jerusalem gives a taste of God's intentions for us:

**Revelation 21:3-4 (KJV):** And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And in all our discussions of the different ways we react to God, these words of Ellen White are to the point:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing (MH 483).

**Theme: “Jesus, Author and Perfector of Our Faith”**

**Leading question:** What can we learn from the way New Testament writers remodel Old Testament stories?

The official study guide declares: “Hebrews 11 and 12 are probably the most-loved chapters of the book.” So let’s ponder the “faithful” characters described in chapter 11. We can go through the characters and add names under each of the following headings. The results should stir up some lively class discussion:

1. Hebrews’ version is glossier than the Old Testament original.

Abraham

- \*laughed (as did his wife Sarah)
- \*worshiped other gods (Josh. 24:2)
- \*was prepared to sacrifice Isaac

Moses

- \*hidden by his parents – who were not afraid
- \*left Egypt, but unafraid of the king’s anger (cf. Exod. 2:14, “Moses was afraid”)

2. Surprising omissions: faithful people in the Old Testament who don’t make the grade in Hebrews 11.

- \*Joshua
- \*Caleb

3. Surprising additions: Old Testament characters who surprisingly are listed among the faithful:

- \*Rahab – prostitute, Canaanite
- \*Gideon – idolater in his later years
- \*Samson – womanizer
- \*Jephthah – sacrificed his daughter because of an unwise oath

**Question:** How does one arrive at a view of inspiration that allows for these differences?

**Comment:** Is it possible simply to let God’s people tell their stories without dictating to them how to do it? Two statements from Ellen White are worth noting:

\*“No man can improve the Bible by suggesting what the Lord meant to say or ought to have said” *Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, p. 16.

\*“There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures” *Selected Messages*, Bk 1, p. 20.

**Question:** What advantage might there be in simply laying the inspired passages side by side without trying to “harmonize” them?

**Question:** What do you find most encouraging about this “faith” chapter?

**Comment:** One theme that runs through the stories of the faithful ones is summarized by the last two verses of Hebrews 11:

**Hebrews 11:39-40:** Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

**Comment:** God planned things in such a way that all the communion of the saints, past and present could receive their full reward in Christ at the same time. None of us will have an advantage.

**Theme: “Receiving an Unshakeable Kingdom”**

**Leading question:** What makes a kingdom “unshakeable”?

The reference to an unshakeable kingdom comes at the end of Hebrews 12. The section in which it appears is worth noting as it is jam-packed with vivid and potentially troubling images.

**Heb. 12:25-29:** See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

**Comment:** The emphasis on fear in this passage is sobering. At least three elements are listed.

\*If you think the earlier warning is sobering, the next one will be more so (vs. 25)

\*Next time God will not just shake the earth, but the heaven (vs. 26)

\*Our God is a consuming fire (vs. 29)

**Question:** Why, in the name of gentle Jesus, does Hebrews focus on fear as the motivator?

**Question:** Hebrews 12:27 implies that everything earthly will be shaken and vanish, yet both Testaments refer to a new earth, a very material earth (Isaiah 65:17, Rev. 21:1-4). Why does Hebrews resort to such sweeping judgment on the material earth?

**Question:** Is the emphasis on the substitutionary atonement possibly part of the reason why Hebrews maintains such a strong focus on fear?

### **Acceptable Worship: Hebrews 13:1-6**

At the conclusion of Hebrews 12, the author makes this statement: “Let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.” Then in Hebrews 13, the author lists all the ways that we can offer acceptable service. That’s a list we should examine more carefully:

**Hebrews 13:1-6:** Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those

who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper;  
I will not be afraid.  
What can anyone do to me?"

**Comment:** Let's break that paragraph down into a list and then explore the list more carefully:

1. Let mutual love continue
2. Show hospitality to strangers
3. Remember those in prison
4. Remember those who are being tortured
5. Preserve the purity of marriage
6. Avoid the love of money

One Umbrella trait:

1. Let mutual love continue

Three "outreach" traits:

2. Show hospitality to strangers
3. Remember those in prison
4. Remember those who are being tortured

Two admonitions:

5. Preserve the purity of marriage
6. Avoid the love of money

**Question:** Is there any clue in the letter itself as to why these particular traits are singled out for special attention?

**Comment and Question:** Like a steady drumbeat, warnings and cautions are spread throughout the letter. Do these suggest that the recipients of the letter were unusually careless?

- \*2:1-3 Don't drift away
- \*3:12-13 Beware the unbelieving heart
- \*5:11-12 You need someone to teach you the fundamentals
- \*6:1-8 Warning against falling away
- \*10:26-31 Danger of willfully persisting in sin
- \*13:16 Don't neglect to do good

**The final admonition: Hebrews 12:28.** The memory verse for this week is noteworthy: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe."



– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme: “Let Brotherly Love Continue”**

**Leading question:** What is the most important admonition in the book of Hebrews?

Some eighteen admonitions are packed in to Hebrews 13. How should we identify which one is most important or which ones are most important?

**Question:** Is the title of the lesson, which also reflects this week’s memory verse, the most important: “Let brotherly love continue” (KJV)?

**Comment:** Of all the admonitions, this one seems to come closest to Jesus’ one-verse summary of his message: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12)

1. Let mutual love continue
2. Don’t neglect hospitality to strangers
3. Remember those in prison  
    Remember those who are tortured
4. Let marriage be held in honor
5. Keep your lives free from the love of money  
    Be content with what you have
7. Remember your leaders  
    Consider the outcome of their way of life  
    Imitate their faith
9. Don’t be carried away by strange teachings
13. Let us go to Jesus outside the camp  
    Let us bear the abuse he endured
15. Continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God
16. Do not neglect to do good  
    Do not neglect to share what you have
17. Obey your leaders and submit to them
18. Pray for “us”

In our day, two of the admonitions stand out as worthy of special attention:

Vs. 13 “Let us go to Jesus outside the camp.”

Vs. 17 “Obey your leaders.

**Question: Going Outside the Camp.** The intent of this admonition is to invite us to share the “shame” that Jesus took upon himself. Does that still apply today? Is identifying ourselves as Christians a “shameful” matter which would bring honor to the cause if we are willing to share it?

**Question: Obeying Leaders.** What if leaders are not taking us in the right direction? What is the responsibility of believers when their leaders go astray?

**Question: Summing up the whole quarter.** Clearly the author of Hebrews believed that admonitions were important. But are they as successful in leading people to the desired ends as the leaders seem to think? Here is the new covenant ideal as stated by Jeremiah and echoed in Hebrews:

**Jeremiah 31:33-34:** “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

**Question:** How do we move the church toward that ideal where there are no longer any admonitions but everything springs spontaneously from a heart that has been touched by Christ?