

# **A Study of Hebrews**

**In 16 Sessions**

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## Session 1: Introduction to Hebrews

Hebrews presents one of the most fascinating and challenging studies in the New Testament. It is fascinating because of its uniqueness, being written anonymously, offering scarce clues to its specific context, and presenting unique theological ideas through a sustained central argument. Stylistically, the letter is rather highbrow, its author being given to lofty rhetoric and a style that is not for the faint of heart. It is challenging for many of these same features, and for the complexity of the argument. It is just long enough to fall outside of the boundaries of what most of us read at a single sitting, yet it must be understood and interpreted as a whole. It diverges from its argument on occasion, but does not do so for long or without purpose. To understand the argument requires fairly extensive understanding of the Old Testament scriptures, and turns on historical and sacrificial nuances that the casual observer might not have caught.

The benefits of taking the study go beyond those yielded by any taxing study requiring discipline to grasp, but there are concrete understandings that can be gained from the study of Hebrews that could not easily be found in other parts of scripture. Beyond unique and interesting theological points, it is perhaps here that we find the most inspiring and encouraging call for faithfulness in the New Testament. This author, whoever he or she may be, uses sound theology, playful biblical interpretation, a skillful argument and draws upon a treasury of hero stories to beg the reader to persevere in the face of temptation. Like Churchill, the Hebrew author skillfully reminds us to "Never, ever, ever, ever give up."

As an introduction, **the driving objective of this week is to prepare the class to invest themselves in the study by having a useful overview of the text and encouragement about its value.** Here you'll find an overview of the book's context, three key theological themes of the book, and a challenge. The three components may be addressed in any order, it seems to me.

### Original Context Matters

- The letter is written anonymously. Is this an issue for us? Does it bother us that we can't ascertain the author?
  - In fact, the history of interpretation of Hebrews demonstrates positive and negative responses to its ambiguity. Some have engaged in the quest for finding the identity of the writer, while some have accepted the canonicity as a matter of fact and moved on with ease. In the end, the letter was held to be canonical, as being guided by the Holy Spirit, containing sound doctrine in line with the body of New Testament teachings. There are clues within the text, such as the author's style, their command of the New Testament, their connection with Timothy, and common themes with other New Testament writers or figures, but in the end any definitive claim to authorship appears elusive.
- The Letter seems written to an audience contained of Hellenized Jews, probably living outside of Judea in other cities in the Roman World. It appears that they identified

closely with the Jewish system of atonement, knew the scriptures well, read them in their Greek version (the Septuagint) and had the experience of being outcasts. That identity as Jewish outcasts had perhaps intensified as they became ostracized from that community by virtue of their Christian confession.

- Is it possible for us to identify with such people? What experience of being excluded from society have we experienced as Christians? What systems (religious or secular) have we turned away from that we once felt safety in? Is there anything that makes it tempting to go back to those things?
- One of the key skills of interpreting a letter such as this is to continuously ask, “what problem does the author seem to be trying to solve by writing this? What did he see as an attack against the church to which this letter is addressed? What can we reasonably infer about the background, given what is written. That means skillfully discerning what the author seems to be working to persuade the recipients to believe, feel, or act. Sometimes that simply means that some were either opposed to or were doubtful of whatever the opposite of the message given is. Sometimes though, the text may begin with or turn to subjects that the author knows the readers will agree with, in order to win their thoughts before challenging whatever is amiss, but the reward of carefully reading the text in such a way is that we are better prepared to ask, “What would the author say to us?”

## Key Themes

Three themes continually resurface in this letter, and together they form a compelling argument against the relapse that endangers the recipients. The author thoroughly argues:

**Jesus is superior.** He is superior to angels, superior to Moses. Superior to all other ways of life, Jesus is simply superior to everything. This is not simply a philosophical point though, or an academic theological one. Jesus’ superiority is the basis for faithfulness. A turning away from Jesus to anything else is a turn to something that is inferior. The writer skillfully demonstrates how the theological point makes an impact, not just on what we think, but what we feel and do. One of the great treasures that we find in Hebrews is a very developed way of thinking about Jesus and his work, and a way of translating that into our own lives.

**Faithfulness is obedience to the one we trust.** Hebrews also has much to teach us about the nature of faithfulness. It does so by positive examples of those who walked by faith, negative examples of those who did not, and an explanation of what it is that Christians believe in. Hebrews provides a great argument in favor of faithfulness and illustrates well what that faithfulness entails.

**Perseverance is indispensable.** The heart of the letter is probably best seen as its call to perseverance. This might be seen as an aspect of faithfulness, but seems to deserve mention because of its centrality to the writer’s purposes. It is in the calls to perseverance that we gain our most clear glimpse into what is wrong in the community who originally received this letter. The letter addresses their fears and feelings of isolation though, and calls upon them

to set their faces forward without any question of turning back. The letter is one whose main purpose is encouragement.

## Challenge

This quarter, we have developed a challenge for our adult classes studying Hebrews, which is the memorization of a set of passages from the book. This is not intended as a rote drill for the sake of verbatim recall, but as a spiritual practice which in this case will help us in two ways.

1. It will give us fuel for meditation and prayer. Letting the word soak into our minds at the level of memorization can be a practice that prepares us to fully ponder and meditate on the passages at hand. As the word reaches deep into our hearts, we can become open to hearing the word on a different level, absorbing it into the deep, hidden places of our heart. We become intimately related to that bit of scripture and the God it reveals to us.
2. It will help us more clearly understand the text as a whole. Hebrews is best read at a sitting, but since we are looking at the book over the course of several months, memorization of key passages can help us connect the different parts of the text together. The passage I memorize this week may help me grasp what I am hearing a month from now more fully.

The little black book that the office has produced is intended to be a resource for this challenge. On the first of February there will be a book for every student. The book contains three passages that have been pre-selected, that we hope everyone will choose to memorize, but it also contains spaces for other passages to be added by each student as the study progresses. Please encourage your students to take on this challenge! It may be that after each week's lesson you ask, "What text from today's lesson best illustrates the heart of what we have learned?" It also seems that each week will provide opportunities to refer to either passages that you have all memorized as a group, or that individuals may wish to note from their own study. I hope that this discipline truly serves as a companion and aid to your classes study and transformation.

The prologue in the book provides further details.

## Session 2: Hebrews Chapter 1

v. 1 The text starts with the recognition that God has been speaking to his people for a while. The idea that God "speaks" is critical for Hebrews, which quotes OT scripture over 40 times, and makes literally over a hundred allusions to texts that aren't directly quoted. Interestingly, Hebrews avoids the usual phrase "It has been written", instead preferring to refer to what God has "spoken". It seems that this is intended to bring the text closer, to make it feel more immediate, even though in this first verse he is demonstrating that the way God is speaking in the present is through his son.

v. 2-4 focuses on telling us some important things about Christ. He is the son of God. God has made him the heir of everything, and it was through him somehow that God made the universe. (See Col 1) Not only was he involved in creation, by his word of power he is able to sustain the universe as well. Again, this points towards the power of what Jesus has to say...his words sustain the universe!

Also, Jesus is the one who mirrors God. He is the exact representation, the true image of God. Looking at Jesus is the same thing as looking at God. Jesus is a full revelation of God, not a limited human version of God.

It is interesting that Jesus' actions of purification of sin is included here, but as Hebrews is going to develop its argument, this is a key factor. Jesus is going to be portrayed as providing purification in superior way than was previously available. Here in the first verses, we have a key to understanding how the writer understands Jesus superiority, and why that is an important perspective. It is Jesus' superiority that enables our complete purification. His superiority is key to our ability to trust him, to have faith in him.

Finally, an element that is often overlooked, Jesus sits down at the right hand of God. This is the final step in his claim of superiority, his enthronement. This is also an important theme in Ephesians (1:19-23), where the emphasis is one how Jesus being enthroned in heaven shows his power and authority. Here, it is his place/position over the angels that is important, his relative superiority as a being.

The argument that follows these introductory verses shows that the Son is superior to angels, particularly inasmuch as he shares a similar function with them. As a messenger, since Jesus is a superior being, his message is superior to that which was earlier brought by angels. As the argument develops, this is going to be critical because Jesus is bringing a new covenant, one which deserves faith and trust.

## Session 3: Hebrews Chapter 2

Here are a few teaching points that might be helpful in approaching the second chapter of Hebrews.

This chapter builds on the end of chapter one, in which Jesus is demonstrated by a string of OT quotations to be superior to angels. Chapter 2 opens by fleshing out the intended consequences of that argument.

In this part of the letter, the writer is arguing for Jesus' superiority over the angels because of the similar function that he shares with them. They are both messengers, carriers of God's word. The importance of angels was not based on their own authority, but as messengers of God. The message that Jesus carries, should be given even greater weight because it is delivered not by a third party, a created being, but by God's son, who himself is "the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his being" 1:3. So the argument about Jesus' superiority is not purely academic, but has implications for how important the message he carries is to be regarded. How dare we ignore something so great in importance that it has been spoken to us by God's very Son? The argument is pressed even further by acknowledging that the truth of the message has also been confirmed by the activity of the Holy Spirit. The message of salvation that comes through Jesus is divine! We must, as 2:1 says, pay very careful attention to what we've heard.

A second consequence of the argument about Jesus' superiority over angels begins in 2:5. Jesus is superior in that he has been given authority over the world to come. Interestingly, this is a good example of Hebrews reappropriating OT material, reinterpreting it for his own purposes. The writer quotes Psalm 8, which seems to refer to all of humanity, but reinterprets it as a text referring to Jesus' authority over the world to come. The author then uses this as a way of introducing another theme of the letter: the example of Jesus' suffering as a way to glory and honor. The argument here is not based on Jesus' prior superiority, his divine nature, but on the glory that he achieved through the cross. He is crowned with glory and honor "because he suffered death" in 2:9.

This theme is important to the overall purpose of the letter, because the letter's purpose is a call to persevere. In order to achieve that, this letter, like other places in the NT, seeks to attach significance to suffering, to provide meaning for the experience of suffering. This section achieves that in two powerful ways. First, it demonstrates how Jesus' suffering actually worked to his eventual glory. Suffering brings benefit, because it is the path to honor. This theme will continue to be developed in the letter, as the writer is going to describe the recipient's current suffering as a discipline they need to endure in order to receive the promises of God. Suffering is one way that we become holy, and the writer demonstrates that this is a holy path by showing how Jesus, who makes us holy, walked the same path.

Perhaps of even more importance at this stage of the letter, the writer also demonstrated how Jesus' sufferings can be a basis for our feeling a level of solidarity with Jesus. When we suffer, we can know that Jesus has also taken such suffering on himself. We are not alone. Jesus is not a distant savior, but "part of the same family." We are brothers, and I can in a very real sense identify with Jesus. God is not a distant watcher to be blamed, but someone who suffers with us. He exposes himself to the same pain we experience for the sake of

simply identifying with us. This can be a powerful message!

His death is the ultimate expression of this solidarity. By going all the way through with the experience of suffering even to the point of death, Jesus fully identifies with humanity. In this common experience, we recognize that Jesus has been made like us "in every way." (2:17)

Also, his death paves the way for the destruction of death itself. In verse 14-15, Jesus' death is described as destroying the power of the one who held the power of death, the devil. By experiencing the fullest expression of Satan's power, death, Jesus demonstrated the limit of that power, and nullifies it. By overcoming death, Jesus breaks the power that the fear of death could have over us. Jesus, in becoming one of us, takes on our biggest enemy. He suffers death, but ultimately is victorious over it. Because he is superior over even death, those who claim him as Lord are subject to a greater power than even death itself.

One final teaching point from this chapter. In 2:8, the author acknowledges a very important point. It might be argued (and often is!) that if:

1. Jesus has been given authority over the whole world, and
2. There is much that doesn't reconcile with his will, (including much that results in human suffering)

then why is Jesus not intervening to stop that which is against his will? It is interesting that at the first, Hebrews acknowledges that while we know and believe that all things are made subject to him, "yet at present we do not see everything subject to him". It doesn't take much observation to see that there is much in the world that doesn't seem as though it is under Jesus' rule. Hebrews doesn't directly counter this, but it is significant that it recognizes this fact, this tension. We live in an "in between time" era, when God has given the authority to Jesus, and yet we wait for that authority to be exercised in a decisive way. Hebrews acknowledges the tension, but goes on to reaffirm that Jesus' authority is a real fact. It is out of this argument that the material about Jesus' solidarity arises, and helps it make more sense. To those who are holding on, waiting for Jesus' power to be revealed, they have to believe that the suffering that they endure because of God's waiting is for the purpose of their own sanctification, so that they can become even more holy in anticipation of the keeping of God's promises. They may also be encouraged by the solidarity of Jesus in the midst of that waiting.

It seems to me that while these emotional consequences of the argument are significant and encouraging, there is also another element that may be important to us. Although there are certainly times when we experience suffering, it must also be recognized that there are many times when we are distant from the suffering that takes place in the world. Our affluence can separate us from that experience up to a point, although never fully, and perhaps never effectively. But, what does it mean to follow a savior who voluntarily suffers for the purpose of identifying with suffering people? Might there be implications that at times, perhaps with consistency, that we need to place ourselves in situations where we can identify with suffering people?

what might that look like for a church like Pleasant Valley?

## Session 4: Hebrews Chapter 3

Hebrews, with its insistence on the preeminence of Christ, here furthers the argument with a comparison of Christ and Moses. The argument here is a simple development of what has already been established in the letter's line of argumentation. Jesus is worthy of imitation, specifically in his demonstration of faithfulness. He is worthy of even greater honor than Moses, because while Moses was faithful in his role as a servant in God's house, Jesus is not only a servant, but the son who rules over the house. In the metaphor, the house represents God's faithful people. The writer then includes himself and the reader as part of the house, with the condition "if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."

The thought here really is similar to the note at the beginning of chapter 2, "so that we will not drift away". Here though, the author picks up the thread and develops it more substantially. Holding on to our courage, being sure that we don't drift away, forms the core rhetorical objective of the letter. The author's purpose throughout is to encourage the readers, to support them against the possibility of drifting away from the faith. In 2:7 the letter turns to address that theme more fully.

Some thoughts that pop out to me in this latter section of the chapter:

1. Perseverance (which is behavioral) is tied to the ideas of belief and faith in this section. An unbelieving heart is one that turns away. In 18-19, disobedience is tied to unbelief. So there is a connection between the behavioral and the cognitive here.
2. Communal encouragement is a weapon against this type of disobedience. By strengthening each other we become more resilient. We are less likely to be deceived by sin, hardened by it. The implication is that part of what happens when people abandon their faith is that they become discouraged, and discouragement opens the door for deceit. I think this bears true to my experience as a witness. I think discouragement is more deadly than ignorance in matters of faith, and yet our primary modes of operation seem to strike at education rather than encouragement. Not that I believe education, the formation of better understandings, to be wasteful, but the role of specific strategic encouragement may be understated.
3. It strikes me that belief is a process, involving faithfulness over many years. The jury is out on whether we truly believe, until it has been seen whether or not we will remain faithful. Coming to faith is one thing, but remaining faithful is another, and one that is absolutely critical if we are to enter the promised land.

The argument here has an interesting relationship with the Hebrew tradition of the wilderness wanderings. It is argued that Moses was faithful as a servant in all of God's house, but clearly many of those who followed him did not share in that

faithfulness. Their fear of scarcity, other forces, etc, drove them to unfaithfulness. They lost faith that God would take care of them, that their current struggles would be resolved by God's deliverance into the promised land. It begs us, who do not experience dependence but avoid any semblance of it, to consider in what ways we build the trust of God into our lives. In what ways do we experience our dependence on God? Or to ask the question negatively and more bluntly, what do we turn to to make sure that we are independent, that we need not feel dependent on God at all?

## Session 5: Hebrews 4:1-13

In this text, there are at least three places that initially stand out to me as offering material for developing substantial teaching moments. I would probably choose two of these to develop. For me, they would be the first and third of the themes below. I think they go together nicely.

First, the text opens by speaking of the need to be fearful of not entering God's rest. By the metaphor of the wilderness generation, the author shows that while we have a distinct opportunity to enter that rest, we can miss out as well. It is truly our choice. And, that choice is so substantial, so weighty, that we should in considering it actually experience fear. ("Let us be afraid" is a better translation than the NIV's "Let us be careful", although I think the NIV is trying to say something similar.) The word here is confronting us with God's free gracious choice, and the consequence of refusing that choice through our own disbelief and disobedience. We who have heard the gospel must choose to either combine our hearing with faith, or not. The gospel defines all who hear it. After our hearing, we must fall into one of two categories, dependent on our response. We must either become obedient, or become disobedient to what we have heard. We must become faithful, or become unfaithful. Our lives become defined by our relationship to the gospel we have heard, whether we wish them to or not. The gospel of God exerts power to fundamentally define us, even in our rejection of it. By the way, this is a rather offensive idea to the world.

Second, the argument in 4:3-10 regarding the definite existence of a Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God.

This text is admittedly difficult to get our minds around. That's partly because the author here makes the argument in a way that might best be described as playful. He lets a handful of passages from scripture interact with each other, and through that process draws some conclusions about the remaining opportunity for God's people to enter into a Sabbath rest, a sort of spiritual promised land. The difficulty for us is that conclusion is more readily acceptable than the process by which the author reaches the conclusion! To us the logic here is cumbersome and somewhat cryptic. It's almost as if the passage makes more sense if we don't stop to long and work it out...we can accept his point on face. But, if we stop for a minute, it begins to seem somewhat cloudy, and perhaps even circular.

The critical issue seems to me that God speaks of his rest in different ways across time. First, the creation account speaks of God resting, having completed his creative work. Secondly, the generation that wandered in the wilderness missed out on God's rest. But later, in the time of David God is still speaking about his rest, stating that some will not enter into his rest, and by implication, there are still some who will. The bottom line is that God still has a sort of promised rest waiting as a reward to those who remain faithful to him. That rest is something like God's rest from his work in creation, which is an interesting comparison. It is clear that God is an active working presence for the author of Hebrews, so it is not like God has completely ceased activity since creation. But perhaps the text intends that the ones who enter God's rest are somehow relieved of the striving that is characterized throughout the book as the task of those who endure against temptation.

Third, and critically linked to the first idea, is the final section on the power of the word. First of all, it's important to point out, that although the section is paragraphed off in some

translations, it is definitively connected with the preceding section. The power and nature of the word is the reason why we strive, why we make every effort to enter into the rest of God. The nature of the word assures us that we cannot escape the destiny affiliated with our choice.

Beyond that, the observations of the word here are quite incredible. The word here specifically refers to the gospel call, the offer of the promised land. That theme has dominated the book up until this point, and it is for the purpose of encouraging the reader to remain faithful to that call that the author turns here to the nature of the word.

Here the word is characterized powerfully. First, it is a living word. This is interesting, since one of Hebrews' favorite descriptions of God is that God is a "living" God. The word that comes from the living God is itself alive. The word does not just bring life, but it alive itself. It is also active, in the sense that it is powerful and does the work it is intended to do. The word has energy, it has force. Furthermore, the word has a quality that judges and distinguishes. I think this is related to the idea above about how our lives are defined by our response to the gospel. The word judges me. It shows me who I really am. I am laid bare before the word, or pinned down by it. It has power over me. The word overcomes me.

The question then on this section is, what is my relationship to this word? What does such a word have to say about me, to me? Truly, this seems the critical part of this whole section, and an extremely worthwhile discussion for a group of disciples to have. How has the word changed, shaped, confronted, and judged me? What happens when I come into contact with the word? What is the nature of my relationship with God's living word?

## Session 6: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

The text begins by picking back up the high priest motif, which was explicit in 2:17, but is also hinted at in 1:3. The text here continues the main line of argumentation for the book, which is the exhortation to remain faithful. Here that idea gains a little more traction and is fleshed out a little more, as the section indicates that part of what is tempting the readers to be unfaithful is their lack of confidence in their salvation in Jesus. That confidence is shored up here in a couple of interesting ways as the author develops the theme of Jesus as a capable, fitting high priest.

First, the text refers to Jesus as one who has gone into heaven, pointing towards Jesus' ascension to glory. The ascension is a theme that has already been developed. In 1:3 Hebrews notes that Jesus, after providing for purification of sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. Further in chapter one, the ascension theme is developed as a way of demonstrating Jesus' superiority over angels so that the reader feels compelled to accept the word that he brings, which is greater than theirs. Here in 4:13 though, the ascension reference serves as part of a one-two argument for why Jesus makes a great high priest for us. His ascension means that he is continually in God's presence, that he has been approved of by God, that he is someone whom God has glorified. Who better to represent us before God! Jesus is God's own Son, and his identification with God is to our benefit as Jesus acts on our behalf!

The second part of the one-two argument comes in 4:15, and it is the other side of the coin. While the ascension shows Jesus' nearness to and identification with God, that reality on its own could be an alienating thought. Jesus is so different, so superior to us...what are we to him? Why is he concerned to help us at all? And so the author argues powerfully that Jesus is not someone who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but who has experienced temptation. The text further claims that Jesus faced that temptation successfully, without conceding to it. Thus he is in fact perfect. Skipping to the perfection can mislead us though, since the primary thrust of the text is not his perfection, but Jesus' ability to sympathize with us because of temptation. Jesus has placed himself in a position of solidarity with us. Thus, this text really not only develops the theme of the high priest, but also the idea of our brotherhood with Jesus that has been developed in 2:10-18. Jesus remarkably not only identifies with God, but he identifies with us as well. **Jesus knows what it means to be human**, and the importance of this cannot be overstated.

The one-two attack here is that Jesus understands, identifies with, and has experienced being both god and humanity. As such, he is the ideal, perfect candidate for the position of being a high priest before God who represents humanity.

Hebrews is a terrific book for a lot of reasons, and this is as good a place as any to point out one of the reasons why. The book is a rhetorical masterpiece. The complicated logic and our own tendency to overanalyze texts can both distract us from the rhetorical purpose and character of the book. In other words, the book is intended to do something to us, to have an effect on us. That's why it contains several different sorts of appeals. When the author uses logic to demonstrate that we have the opportunity to be included in God's Sabbath rest, the letter strikes at our rational nature, our intelligence. The same is true when later, the text argues for the supremacy of the sacrifice Jesus makes in relation to the sacrifices of the Levitical code. But this text, the explanation of Jesus' position of solidarity with humanity, this text is not meant to appeal only to our minds, but to our hearts. The author wants to

influence what we do, and so he writes not just to change the way we think, but the way that we feel. Sometimes we act in harmony with what we think in our minds, but sometimes it is our hearts that rule our actions. But, if we can get our hearts and minds both convinced of a course of action, then our actions are much more likely to follow. The writer of Hebrews skillfully attacks at both points, alternating between appeals to the mind and appeals to the heart.

In 4:16 we see clearly the reason behind such an approach. The author not only wants us to be able to approach God's throne of grace in order to receive mercy, but to do so confidently! That certainly doesn't mean to approach our worship or relationship with God flippantly (see 12:28), but it refers to the type of trust that we have built into our relationship with God through Christ. Because of Christ, we don't come before God as beggars who expect to be ignored or shooed away, but we come as children who may trust that even in our sinfulness we are loved and can expect forgiveness. The importance in this posture is that it enables us to come to find the grace we need. Fear, the lack of such trust and confidence, leads us to wallow in our own sinfulness and neglect the grace God provides for us.

In chapter 5, the author develops some of the more rational part of the argument again, striking again at the mind by deepening our understanding on a cognitive level. He develops the idea of priesthood again, this time with a theme of submission. The act of taking on a role as a priest is not a power-grab on the part of the one who becomes priest, but it necessarily means a response to God's call and will. It is therefore an act of submission that Jesus takes on the role of high priest. Furthermore, Jesus' life is marked by submission to the will of God, as his suffering apparently teaches him the nature of obedience and creates perfection within him.

For classical theologians, this presents a bit of a difficulty, since it seems to imply that before his suffering, Christ was imperfect. It seems that the point here is that Jesus becomes complete, becomes perfect not in the moral sense, but in that he takes on all the necessary qualities to fulfill the task of a high priest. After his suffering, he becomes the source of salvation, and God sees fit to make him the high priest between God and man forever. This means that he becomes priest in the "order of Melchizedek", but the author isn't ready to explain what that means just yet. This is just the warning shot, a hint of what is going to come in chapter 7.

Just as the last section, that ending in 4:13 challenged us to think about what our relationship is to the word of God that calls us, defines us, and challenges us, this text also brings a certain relationship into question.

How do we relate to God as the one who sits on a throne of Grace, offering mercy?

what kinds of emotions do we have, or are appropriate, to us in that position? It strikes me that while this text wants to convince me to be confident in that pursuit, that I usually don't struggle with lack of confidence, but with arrogance. Most of the time I don't even think about my sinfulness, much less fear God because of it. Here one of the earliest Christian communities was so in tune with their own sinfulness and how that changed their relationship with a Holy God that they have to be convinced that with Jesus as their ally, that which they fear cannot harm them.

But where do I fit into that? I probably need to become more aware of what Jesus had to do to become this high priest, so that I really get the severity of my own sinful condition pre-Christ.

So far in Hebrews, we find that Jesus, who is the reflection of God's glory, the exact representation of God, became incarnate and underwent suffering to get my attention, so that I would know he understands me. Then, Jesus subjects himself not only to physical pain, but he also undergoes spiritual temptation for the sake of opening up the possibility of my redemption. Those realities point toward the intensity of the spiritual problem I face without Christ. The lengths to which Christ went to redeem me denies me the luxury of pretending my sin isn't important. It dispels my illusions, and confronts me by forcing me to ask, "Why did Jesus have to do all this?"

Furthermore, we might interpret the concept of spiritual temptation in this text as involving the temptation to give up, as opposed to enduring the suffering involved in his task. Such a temptation certainly is consistent with what we read in the gospels, and with the ideas of faithfulness and disobedience that we find throughout Hebrews. Such a reading then suggests that the temptation laid upon Jesus was the desire to quit, based on the difficulty of his task. Against this must have weighed the desire to remain faithful to God, and to procure our salvation. It seems to me that this provides another basis for an emotional appeal to faithfulness.

## Session 7: Hebrews 5:11-6:20

This is one of my favorite texts in the book of Hebrews. I love that it challenges us to intentional growth. It strongly rebukes my own stagnation and complaisance, and calls me to grow, grow, grow. Love it!

### 5:11-14

The text opens by rebuking the reading community for their lack of maturation, which prevents further teaching. The rebuke is not based on the level that they are at, but on the level they are at in relation to the time that they have been disciples! The implication is that Christians should grow over time. The longer they walk behind Jesus, they should demonstrate fruitful growth. This is very challenging to the notion that seems all too common that Christianity is about being saved, and then you just coast along until you die and go to heaven. Against that view Hebrews presupposes that we are increasingly changed as long as we remain faithful. The author is astonished that the readers haven't matured further, and they need milk, not solid food. He characterizes their condition as being unacquainted with the "teaching about righteousness." Perhaps this can be understood to mean that they are unacquainted with the understandings that they need to become more righteous.

### 6:1-3

The writer then continues that line of thought by encouraging the readers to leave behind elementary teachings about Christ in pursuit of greater maturity. That line of thought becomes quite interesting when we look at the list of foundations that don't need to be relaid. The writer includes several dimensions which seem to be primarily concerned with either acts of initiation (repentance, faith, baptisms, the laying on of hands) or with things that would occupy the minds of new converts (the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment). The writer is not encouraging the readers to change their beliefs or doctrines about those issues, or to take them lightly, but simply to deepen and expand their faith to encompass more than these basic elements. It is easy for discussion of such matters to preoccupy those whose faith should have moved on! Gratefully, the author expresses the conviction that by God's will we will do so.

this section provides us with an opportunity to ask in what ways our own understanding of faith is deepening, growing. are we moving forward, or is our understanding pretty much the same as it was when we first believed? There is an interesting place for discussion here where class members share what kinds of growth they have experienced, what brought that growth on, what it has meant to them, etc. Why does our growth stall at times, what provokes us to greater growth?

### 6:4-6

The text moves from this catalog of elementary foundations to a discussion of those who have fallen away. It seems a little random and out of place, but the connection is that those who stagnate, who stop growing, are really not that far away from falling back. Stagnation allows other things to crowd out our hearts, our vision, our passion. Also, this passage serves to show us the difference between being initiated into being Christians, and beginning the journey of discipleship. Those who are initiated then turn away to something else flaunt the sacrifice of Jesus which was for their sins. Those who pursue maturity are contrasted by this, because their lives bring about praise for God, and they lead lives of increasing righteousness.

### **6:7-8**

It seems random, but the text then moves to a very telling metaphor about land. On one side you have land that receives God's blessing because it takes God's gift of rain and produces something that is useful to those for whom it is farmed. On the other hand is some land that, even though it presumably has received the same rain, only becomes a briar patch. Its uselessness means that it is in danger of being cleared by fire. The metaphor here encourages us to take advantage of those things which God gives us and can lead us to become fruitful, and challenges us to check what we are producing...fruit or thorns?

I think this section could spark discussion about what kinds of things class members perceive God has given them as "rain". What does it mean to drink in the rain? That could be a powerful metaphor for how we interact with the Word. I want to become a person who drinks in the rain often falling on me, and who produces a crop useful for those for whom I am farmed.

### **6:9-12**

this section closes this whole rebuke by softening the blow a bit, giving the readers some assurance that the author really does believe in them, and recognizes the work they have done and the love they have shown as they have helped God's people. They are encouraged to remain diligent in order to have a sure hope. So here the section concludes by calling their attention back to the theme of faithfulness and perseverance. By faithfulness they become able to claim the promises of God by imitating those who have already claimed such promises. This leads the reader to flesh out the meaning of God's promise a little more clearly.

### **6:13-20**

I don't have much to say about this section, since it seems relatively straightforward. The important element is that the writer continues to pound away at how firm God's promise is. The faithful simply must take a confident posture towards God, not based on their own actions, but based on God's certainty. God has arranged things so that

we may be greatly encouraged! I also find this section inspiring, with some really beautiful language. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. God does not will us to be cowering, fearful, pitiful beings. He intends us to be confident, assured, hopeful.

## Session 8: Hebrews 7:1-28

### Jesus is a High Priest in the Order of Melchizedek

This text, and the chapters immediately following it, are perhaps some of the most odd and mysterious passages in the New Testament, and are often avoided for that reason. However, if we are not shy about it and dig in a little bit, there is something within them that can be of benefit to our faith, particularly as we understand better what it is that Lord Jesus does for us in his priestly role.

There are a couple of texts which are prerequisites for understanding the argument. The background story about Abraham and Melchizedek is found in Genesis 14. Hebrews' argument is also critically derived from Psalm 110, particularly verse 4.

The letter has been pointing towards the argument that will be developed in this chapter, giving us subtle bits of foreshadowing at 5:6, 10, and perhaps also 2:17 and 4:14. Additionally, 1:13 is also a reference to Psalm 110, and may be subtle pointer towards the argument which is going to grow out of 110:4 here in chapter 7. Also, the section from 4:14-5:10 began to pave the way by drawing a picture of Jesus as a high priest. Now the author is ready to flesh out a little bit more about Jesus' high priesthood is to be understood.

Under the Levitical law code (The Law of Moses), the role of priest was only given to a subset of one tribe, Aaron's descendants of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 28-29, 40, Leviticus 8-9, 21-22, Numbers 3). Jesus descended from Judah. So a natural question for someone living within the Levitical code is how in the world Jesus can be a priest. Jesus' ancestors dare a liability here, and at first glance, the argument here is in place to address that liability. But upon further analysis, the author's aim is not to simply to describe Jesus priesthood as legitimate, but as superior to any levitical priesthood.

### Understanding the Text

Chapter 7 opens by giving a brief recap of the story of Abraham and Melchizedek that takes places after Abraham rescues Lot. The version in Genesis 14 offers a bit more detail, but the parts that are important for the author of Hebrews are few and simple.

Melchizedek was "king of Salem" and priest of "God Most High".  
Melchizedek met Abraham after his battle, and blessed him.  
Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

Hebrews offers the short recap, then playfully interprets Melchizedek's name and city morphologically, dissecting the names into their parts and their root Hebrew meanings. Melchizedek is derived from two Hebrew words, melek and tzedek, which mean "king" and "righteousness", so the author interprets this to mean that Melchizedek is a "king of righteousness". The author also interprets the title Genesis gives Melchizedek "king of Salem" to mean "king of peace. Together, these playful linguistic arguments don't contribute much to the logical argument, but they aren't purposeless. The first step in the argument is going to be to demonstrate Melchizedek's worthiness. So to give him a title of a king of righteousness

is a good way to get the ball rolling. What I mean by playful is simply that by strict means, there isn't any logical value in the arguments. Just because someone is named "Charity" doesn't mean they are loving, nor does the name "Grace" indicate that you can expect forgiveness from a person named thus. Nor would we assume that Michael Nutter is a man of uncommonly brotherly love just because he is the Mayor of Philadelphia. But it is a playful way of putting the ideas in our minds! And the author has more convincing evidence up his sleeve anyways.

There are two main arguments in favor of Melchizedek being worthy of honor. First, Abraham pays him a tithe. This is of course long before the Tithing requirements of the Levitical law were instituted, and the author takes this to mean that Abraham had great respect for Melchizedek as a priest. In fact, the argument is made that in a way even Levi, whose descendants will collect the tithe from the other tribes, paid the tithe to Melchizedek through his great-grandfather Abraham.

The second argument is that Abraham received a blessing from Melchizedek. In the culture of the patriarchs, it was the greater person who gave a blessing to a person of lesser honor. So the conclusion is that Abraham honored Melchizedek and recognized his priesthood.

In verse 11 the argument shifts from the passage in Genesis to the material in Psalm 110, which indicates that there is someone who is given a priesthood in the "order of Melchizedek." This is a different sort of priesthood, one that is "forever". Hebrews interprets this as meaning that there are imperfections within the Levitical priesthood, since if that were not the case, there would be no need for a priesthood that was any other than in the order of Aaron. The priesthood of the descendants of Aaron though necessitated that it be passed from person to person because of the mortality of the priests, but Hebrews argues that Jesus' priesthood is far superior because it is eternal, because it is given to one whose life has been proven indestructible by the resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' priesthood will eternally endure since death has no power over him. A person under the Levitical code would likely be served by multiple priests over the course of life, but one who relies on Jesus relies only on him, forever. He provides constant intercession for us.

One last element of the analysis is that in Psalm 110, the offer of a priesthood in the order of Melchizedek is made with an oath. This theme is set up somewhat with the discussion of oaths in the last part of chapter 6. The oath here is interpreted to be a promise that God has given to Jesus, and this adds another layer to the security of what results from the oath. God has sworn to provide for our salvation!

After all this, the author summarizes in 7:26-28 all that has been said up to this point on the work of Jesus for us. Jesus is a priest who is blameless, pure, and exalted. He has good standing before God and stands before God for the sole purpose of interceding for us (not himself). He is not a weak, human priest, but a perfect divine high priest who has provided for our sins once and for all.

### **What do we take away?**

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<sup>1</sup> There is some discussion about whether the text is meant to indicate that Melchizedek is immortal as well, or whether it is just pointing out that he appears that way in the Genesis text.

This is a good week to take stock of how the whole study of Hebrews is informing our faith, and particularly in relation to its main purpose. It is written to those who are having difficulty maintaining their own faith, perhaps in relation to some persecution, and almost certainly in the face of their own sin. To those whose consciousness of their own sinfulness has become a danger, Hebrews is building the case that our own sinfulness is no match for the faithfulness of Jesus. Jesus is an eternal, blameless, understanding, powerful high priest who is totally bent on making a way for us to become holy. Our sin is no small matter, but wondering and worrying if Jesus can take care of it is kind of like worrying whether or not my bank can take care of the change I scraped together out of the couch...okay, well maybe that's not a very timely illustration. It's kind of like calling in David Smith to help you put on a band-aid and being worried he can't handle it. It's like asking Jimmy Cone to come over and help you change a light bulb in a lamp and being afraid he'll somehow mess it up, or not believing that Mike Stillman's design for a new doghouse will keep your pooch dry and aesthetically pleased. It's not trusting James Meadors to be able to fix you a ham sandwich. Jesus is infinitely more than capable of handling our sin, and that is beyond dispute. Each chapter of Hebrews adds another layer to that building argument.

A second bit of gospel in this chapter is specifically for us Gentiles. The Levitical priesthood was ordained to serve the descendants of Israel, to provide an expression of God's grace in his relationship with Israel. Those of us outside of that covenant relationship could glean no hope from that! But here we can see that the new covenant and its priestly provision is not limited to those of Jewish ancestry as before. The new priest, Jesus, signals a new covenant, and this chapter important points out that this covenant is not confined to the ancestral boundaries of the old covenant! For Gentiles, this is incredibly good news! If Jesus wasn't born of Judah, but was a Levite, a descendant of Aaron, then no matter his purity, blamelessness, or exaltation, we could be left out of the loop. But thankfully, Jesus is a high priest of the order of Melchizedek, and this points towards the universal access to this covenant that Jews and Gentiles alike can share.

Finally, it is one of the remarkable features of this book that it does an amazing job of connecting us into the story of God's people throughout time. It may seem ironic that this book which speaks of the superiority of the new covenant builds so heavily on the foundation of the Hebrew scriptures. But this letter is not an attack on the Judaic faith, as some have supposed. In fact it is an extension of that faith, and does a great job showing how our faith can be connected to the stories of Abraham, David, Moses, and even such obscure figures as Melchizedek. Hebrews teaches and demonstrates that we are part of a larger story.

## Session 9: Hebrews 8:1-9:10

All of the material in this middle part of the Hebrews argument deals with the transition between the Levitical code and the covenant initiated by Jesus. In chapter seven, the author approached that transition primarily through a discussion of the priesthood, arguing that Jesus is a legitimate high priest and a superior one in comparison to that provided for in the Levitical code. In chapter 8 and the first part of chapter 9, the focus shifts slightly to the covenants themselves, and the covenants' contexts for sacrifice and worship.

### Understanding the Text

Hebrews is like a soup. It is not a static piece of scripture, the pieces of which can all be read independently of each other with benefit to the reader. The rhetorical nature of the book means that in order to read and interpret the book as a whole, you have to get into the process of the book. You have to see each piece in light of the whole. The process is kind of like watching somebody make a soup. They begin with some stock, and stir in an ingredient, let it simmer, then add a bit more, and then after that simmers they add a few more flavors until the final product is more than all of the individual ingredients themselves. Hebrews starts off with a little Christology, then adds some flavor with ideas about God's enduring word. He adds in some language about Jesus as a priest, and adds some discussion about the temple as well.

One of the things that makes this text difficult to study is that we are structured to study the text at smaller intervals. It's a bit like extracting a small piece of bacon or a chive from a pot of potato soup, and then upon tasting them trying to conjecture what the soup as a whole will taste like. That may be quite random, but as we study this section, I want to greatly encourage you to do so in the context of the larger "soup". This section adds something to the greater argument, but cannot be understood independent of it. The important thing is that we are adding to the soup, and it is becoming a more and more delicious reminder of the supremacy of Christ over all things, and our own needs are inconsequential when compared to his power. Christ is the only thing worthy of our faithfulness.

This particular text begins with a checkpoint, 8:1-2, that serves to summarize all that has come before. It says that the main point has been that Jesus is a high priest who is enthroned at the right hand of God in heaven and who serves in a sanctuary not made by human hands. The immediately following text illuminates this somewhat. The writer has been arguing that Jesus is a high priest, interceding for us before God. It is important to note that Jesus is a high priest, not was a high priest. It is easy to imagine that the priestly role Hebrews imagines is confined to the sacrificial atonement that Jesus provided through the cross. In reality though, that just set the stage for Jesus to be able to take the role of priest, which he fulfills actively in the present. And if that is true, then it is clear that Jesus is not acting as a priest in any human built place, but in precisely the place where he is: heaven. Jesus did not ascend to merely wait passively for the judgement day, but is rather actively involved in interceding with God on our behalf. This is not Jesus' former ministry, or one which entirely waits for the future, but his current one.

Heaven, what we think of as God's dwelling place, is not just a throne room as we

sometimes imagine it, but here Hebrews informs us that it is in fact a sanctuary. It is a sort of temple, the one after which the tabernacle pointed towards in a shadowy sort of way. 9:1-5 gives a description of some of the elements of that tabernacle, and it is followed by a picture of tabernacle worship, where once a year the priest brings a sacrifice for himself and the people into the inner room to intercede for the people and make atonement. Hebrews, in an argument that is going to be more fully described later, claims that those practices were incomplete, and that Jesus, the exalted high priest who makes a sacrifice out of his own blood though he be blameless himself, is able to make full atonement for our sins for all time. What took place in an incomplete way took place in a place that was an incomplete reflection of God's sanctuary. This is not indicative of the physical layout of the place as much as it seems to reflect the need for holiness for entry. Only the perfectly holy may enter the inner sanctuary. Only by the actions of Jesus may we become perfectly holy.

Framed within this discussion of the sanctuary we find a discussion of the covenants which make these relationships between Holy God and becoming-holy humanity possible. Hebrews cites a section of Jeremiah 31 to show how God had made known his intention to initiate a new covenant. This is because "[their ancestors] did not remain faithful to my covenant", and the next covenant differs in type. The passage from Jeremiah seems to indicate the role of the Holy Spirit in the coming covenant, which will make knowledge about God directly accessible to everyone. Also, it involves a promise of forgiveness, so that knowledge of the people's sins is wiped from God's memory. All of this at this point in the text is simply for the purpose of demonstrating that a new covenant has been planned. The prior regulations served as a forward-pointing measure, but now that the new covenant has been established, this old one has become obsolete.

### **What do we take away?**

This text contains a few items to bolster and enrich our faith. First is the encouraging concept of Jesus being continually in a place of intercession for us, and that he does so from a place of enthronement and power. We tend to think of the atonement as something accomplished completely in the past, at Calvary, but in fact Jesus is continually at work cleansing us from our sins. The means has been established in a once and for all sort of way, but Jesus carries on the activity of atonement even now as our high priest in heaven.

Secondly, there is much reflection to be done and encouragement to be gained regarding the enactment of the new covenant. When Hebrews employs the text in Jeremiah, he is saying, "We are living in the time for which our ancestors longed!" We now experience a new, liberating and perfect covenant with God! Although the part selected here in Hebrews offers much in terms of encouragement, the real gospel here is that we are living in the days which the prophets foretold God would definitively act in a way to relate to his people. So we might ask and discuss, what does it mean for us to live within such a new covenant? We know what is new on God's part. What is new on our part? How does the text in Jeremiah strike us as gospel?

## Session 10: Hebrews 9:11-10:18

This week's text is the culmination of the major argument that's been developing since at least chapter 4. I'm glad to see this text come, because I'm sure your classes are ready to move on to different motifs, having probably thought about Jesus' high priesthood enough to last them for a while. It's one of the difficult things about studying this epistle in our hour a week format, because we've been in the middle of a long section that really doesn't divert into many other topics for long. Now, finally, we can wrap that up and move on.

Let's not mistake our fatigue with this section as commentary on its worthiness, though. Although it may seem like these texts have said virtually the same thing every week, in reality there has been a great deal of movement and development in our author's purpose. As a result of the ground work already loosely laid, this week we find a fairly tightly constructed section that helps us understand the once and for all nature of Jesus' work for us.

One last note about timing. The material at hand for this week is oddly silent about the resurrection as an independent event, even though the two events that immediately precede and follow the resurrection are critical focal points. Some of you may wish to use your class time this week, which may include visitors for the Easter holiday, to discuss that seasonal theme. If so, it seems to me that one way to do that would be to speak about how the resurrection is the bridge between the two events so critical to the theology of this section, namely the death of Christ and his enthronement in heaven as high priest. Without the resurrection, Christ's death is not proven to be the meaningful sacrifice of the Son of God. You may spend time discussing how the resurrection provides meaning to the sacrifice of Christ. We don't often speak about the connection between Christ's death and his resurrection, and so a discussion that connects the theological meaning of the two events could be quite engaging. Also, without the resurrection Christ cannot meaningfully be enthroned in heaven and act as mediator of the covenant and our high priest before God, so the resurrection has a word to say about the work that Christ is presently engaged in. Ultimately, though the resurrection may be unmentioned in this text, it is undoubtedly a critical factor in the realities this text addresses.

### Understanding the Text

This section of Hebrews demonstrates a transitional understanding of how God's people relate to God through sacrifice. The old sacrifices of the Levitical code served their purpose, but are now obsolete in the face of Christ's reliance on animal sacrifices to allow God's people to approach God as ceremonially clean. Hebrews argues that this did not actually change the condition of the people's heart before God, but gave them an outward holiness. Perhaps we might think of it as God's way of giving the people a representation of the forgiveness he was offering as an act of grace. They could not buy or afford forgiveness, could not pay the cost, but he provided a means by which they could experience that forgiveness through the ceremonies of sacrifice. The ceremony then provides the opportunity for God's extension of grace, but does not actually bring about any change in the sinful character of the heart. The inward person is not made clean.

But Jesus' blood, on the other hand, is not from an animal but from a human. It's from the son of God who lived an unblemished life. The sacrifice of such perfection, from the obedient Son, allows Jesus to bring about eternal redemption. The value isn't ceremonial, designed for

the experience of the worshipper, but is actually redemptive. It fundamentally changes the way that God relates to us. It doesn't just symbolize forgiveness, but enacts forgiveness. Because of the difference in value (from ceremonial/symbolic to redemptive/actual) There is no need for the sacrifice to be repeated. The effect is lasting and eternal. The theological point the author is making in this section is the finality of the sacrifice.

The reason all of this is important is that it is critical to our own faithfulness. One of the barriers to our ongoing faithfulness can be an awareness of our own sin, especially when it recurs years after we have become disciples. For someone living under the Mosaic covenant, that problem was provided for by a system of continual sacrifices that helped the people perceive God's grace to them, the forgiveness they were receiving. But now, we see our sin, we receive forgiveness from God because of Christ, and then live on. Despite our best intentions, we still succumb to temptation, and are left wondering what to do. Do we have to perform some ritual, like baptism, again? Is there some ceremony that we need to accomplish to gain forgiveness again?

No! The forgiveness we receive in Christ does not merely cover our sins up until the point of our baptism, it is thankfully a gift of ongoing forgiveness and grace. While to some that may seem to provide license for disobedience, in reality it can help us become more faithful disciples by removing the guilt in our consciences that some of us unnecessarily carry around constantly. Those who are tempted to give up because of the awareness of their own sin may be encouraged by the knowledge that Christ has definitively provided for the forgiveness of those sins. Note the phrasing of 10:14, "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." We are "being made holy", so in one sense, we are still in the process of changing, of God forming us to be like him. But at the same time, we have already been "made perfect forever". Christ sacrifice brings about our forgiveness and allows for us to be brought into a process by which we can be made holy. The forgiveness we receive makes it possible for us to press on towards holiness without being derailed by every sin we commit.

This is God's will. Not that we would be continually be bringing him sacrifices, but that we would be made holy. The Old Covenant provided for a measure of holiness, but Christ's work puts us on the path of being holy inside and out. He has truly done away with sin.

### **What we can take away**

I think there are a couple of things to stress as take-aways from this week's text. First and most obviously would be the encouragement of being finally forgiven. Your class might have some fruitful discussion about how guilt can take over our minds, hearts, and lives. What does guilt do to us? How can guilt destroy us? How have we reacted to the awareness of our own sins? Are we even aware?

The other side of those questions can ask about how it feels to be forgiven. How can forgiveness empower faithfulness? Is it true that awareness of our own forgiveness can make us more holy in the future?

The other thing that might be worth spending some time discussing would be the idea of how God is making us holy. Do we perceive that God is making us into a more holy people? What are some of the marks of greater holiness that we see on our lives, or on the lives of others

in the church?

## Session 11: Hebrews 10:19-39

The text this week provides the payoff for the material in the preceding chapters and sets up the great section on faith found in chapter 11. It contains one of the more memorable and well-known passages, 10:24-25 and provides a very rich and balanced set of conclusions to the high priest Christology that the letter has laid out thus far. The effect is a sobering word of exhortation, one that captures the heart of the whole epistle.

### Understanding the Text

#### 10:19-25

First of all is a section that opens with a summary of the preceding argument (10:19-21) and uses that summary as a springboard for three significant exhortations. Because of the position and role which Christ is undertaking as high priest, the writer gives these three actions as logical consequences, each marked in the English by the key words, "let us...". Taken together, these exhortations spell out the point of Hebrews, the desired result of the letter. All of the preceding theology has been to encourage the reader to take the three actions laid out in this section.

**"Let us draw near..."** Knowing that Christ has made possible our entry into God's presence by making us holy through his blood, the author invites us to confidently approach God. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, we need not fear God's presence, but recognize and celebrate his nearness. We recognize that because of Jesus, we live in the ongoing presence of God with confidence. Unlike Adam and Eve, who because of guilty consciences hid from God in fear, we who live by the blood of Jesus confidently enjoy fellowship with Holy God. We come out into the open before God, and do not need to hide from him with guilty consciences. It's not a show either, but something we can do sincerely, because we know that Christ has removed our guilt, and that we've been cleansed. It is quite possible to read the reference to washing with pure water as a reference to a symbolic meaning of baptism, so that the author is pointing back towards that initiation rite as a source of confidence for our ongoing life before God. Overall though, the emphasis in verses 19-21 as well as in 22 is on the actions of Christ spelled out in the previous chapters. It is because of the confidence we have in the blood of Jesus, in the new way opened up by his body, because of his priesthood and the priestly act of sprinkling our hearts with his blood that we have the confidence to come to God. This first exhortation is going to be balanced by 10:26-31 below.

**"Let us hold unswervingly to the faith we profess"** Connected with the confidence to approach God is the author's central plea to the readers to stay the course of their faith and not lose heart. Our failures should not derail us from the path of our perfection in Christ. When we give up at the first hints of failure, we undercut both Christ's work of redemption in the cross and the hope of what he has for us in the future. We do not come to follow Christ because we are already saints, but in following him we are made saintly. This exhortation is going to be picked up at the end of the chapter, and developed more fully in chapters 11-12.

**"Let us consider how we may spur one another on..."** The final exhortation is intensely pragmatic and tied to the second one, since it is remarkably difficult to "hold

unswervingly" to hope on one's own. The support and encouragement of the community is incredibly important component of God's plan for our salvation. The spurring on that the author encourages is wide-ranging, including our involvement in relationships (love), ethics (good deeds), and community (meeting together). The encouragement we offer is forward looking, growing with every step closer to the day of Christ's return. It is interesting to note that this text, perhaps the prime New Testament text referring to our assembling together does not mention the need to do so in ritual terms, as though it were a requirement to satisfy God, but rather places the exhortation in terms of our relationships and encouragement of each other. Importantly, this does not at all change the urgency of the exhortation. Our meeting together is critical to our ability to maintain focus on God and to provoke each other to greater holiness. Thus it is an integral part of how God is shaping and changing us. God sanctifies us by the power of his spirit at work in our brothers and sisters encouragement.

### **10:26-31**

This section strongly warns against neglecting these exhortations. The exhortations are meant to sustain our faith, but if we choose to deliberately turn away from our faith, the consequences are severe and sure. This section points backwards to what the author mentioned in 2:1-3 and 6:4-6; the stakes are high when we are choosing between faith and faithlessness.

The unanswered question is what the author means by "willful" or "deliberate" sin. There is a real tension at work here, since a great part of the book is actually an argument for the ongoing efficacy of Christ's sacrifice for our sins and failures as disciples. Surely this text isn't naysaying that very point, it would not be logical if this text was intended to make us constantly sweat out whether or not we were okay with God. However, to take the text seriously means that we must recognize the possibility of some who have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant committing such sin that they are "trampling the Son of God underfoot". That likely is not intended to be sin which a disciple seeking to follow the Lord commits in a moment of weakness, but is more likely intended to refer to the wholesale apostasy the letter is written to prevent. The language of the consequences here is intentionally strong, but so is the language describing the sin. It is done "deliberately", makes us "enemies of God", and is equal to "rejecting the Law of Moses". It is "trampling the Son of God underfoot", treating the blood of the covenant as "an unholy thing", and those who do so have "insulted the Spirit of Grace." This is not sin of weakness, but is sin which represents a turning away from the path of discipleship altogether. The readers may have thought they had reasons to do so, but Hebrews clearly communicates that while there is a cost to having faith, there is certainly a cost to faithlessness as well.

### **10:32-39**

The final section here returns to the exhortation to persevere. Although the next chapter is going to provide a whole cast of examples of perseverance and faithfulness, the surprising choice here is...the readers themselves! They have already demonstrated the strength they need to remain faithful. What is required is not something new, but just perseverance in the faith they have already displayed. This section also gives us some clues into the actual life situations of the original readers, so that while we may read these words as directed to us as well, reminding us to remain in the faith, we can also add those original readers to the cast of people we consider heroes of faith. Here is a whole community who has very much lived out Jesus' words in Matthew 5:11-12. What would it be like to a part of such a community of

faith? And yet, the letter itself is evidence that even in the midst of such great faith, doubts and temptations existed. Surely this will help us deal with our own doubts and temptations!

## **What do we take away?**

This is a great text, and perhaps is more inspiring, if not as theologically dense, than the preceding chapters. If you're looking for a text worthy of memorization, you could do a lot worse than the opening section. But what can we all walk away with?

First, what we believe about Jesus has consequences for how we live. All the high priest Christology that has been developing is meant to support the exhortations here. It is because of who he is and what he does that we are supposed to draw near, hold on, and encourage each other. The author could have sent a much shorter letter, one that just said, "Be confident before God, don't give up, and encourage each other." But instead he argues extensively to change the way we think, knowing that this can't help but have an impact on what we decide to do.

Secondly it is a matter of great concern whether our assemblies serve to fulfill the functions outlined in the third exhortations. When we meet together, what happens? Do we spur one another on to love better, more fully? Do we provoke each other to do good deeds? Do we encourage each other? Does our encouragement grow with anticipation of Christ's return? These questions, and a discussion of how your class members experience these realities, could form a great part of the class time this week with great benefit. How are you as a teacher encouraged in these areas? What are some ways you could use greater encouragement? What testimony can your class members offer for how this works and why it is needed?

Third, while the text from 10:26-31 could be misused as a weapon of guilt and shame, its sobering reality can usefully remind us that these are not small matters that we read about. These are, in fact, relevant to our eternal destiny. We may have a useful discussion of the proper role of fear in our relationship to God. Fear is out of vogue, but is it completely out of place? Who need be afraid, and who needn't be?

## Session 12: Hebrews 11

Logically, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews could have been skipped. It adds no critical piece of evidence, no proof without which the argument would be rendered invalid. The main line of the argument for why they should remain faithful could very well proceed from 10:39 straight into 12:1 without skipping a beat. The lines of the argument are already drawn. But this chapter isn't about the lines, it's about the color. Hebrews 11 adds a great deal of color to the picture that the author wishes to communicate to us.

There are several ways to approach this chapter from a teaching perspective. This week I'll offer some interpretive points, then some areas for potential discussion.

### Interpretive

If you're inclined to spend the bulk of your time on the interpretive side of things, then this chapter offers a greater wealth of meat than might be thought, given its narrative nature and its nearly poetic prose.

Here are some places I might stop to dig in a little:

11:1 begins with the connection between hope and faith. Faith is related to the unseen and denotes a certain relationship to the unseen; a willingness to accept the unseen as real and valid. There are some notoriously difficult translation issues at play here. What we can translate confidently reads, "And faith is the \_\_\_\_\_ of what is hoped, the \_\_\_\_\_ of things not seen." Filling in the blanks with certainty is a dicey proposition. The first blank is the greek hypostasis, which shows up in two other places in the book 1:3 and 3:14. In 1:3 it is almost always translated with the sense of "substance/exact representation". In 3:14 by contrast, it is most commonly translated with the sense of "conviction/assurance". In 11:1, it is translated by both senses in different translations, and there's a good case for each option. The second blank is elegchos, and this is the only time it shows up in scripture. It can mean "evidence/proof", or can also mean "confidence/assurance". In my own judgment (Hovater) the context persuades me that the sense of "confidence" is preferable for both words, so that the reading should be something like "Faith is the confidence in what is hoped, the conviction of things not seen." This is more like a 65/35 conviction than an absolute judgment, though, and I certainly wouldn't brand anyone a heretic for taking the other readings! Furthermore, it may be that what we can say for certain, that faith is connected with hope and the unseen, are worth emphasizing and shouldn't get lost in the other ambiguities.

11:3 is one of the clearest affirmations of creatio ex nihilo in scripture. It clearly states that God's creative activity is a process by which God creates the world out of nothing. By contrast, the Genesis accounts, when read by themselves, seem to suggest that God creates the world out of some sort of matter which exists in chaos. The genesis account begins with the earth tohu wawohu, formless and empty. I would characterize these accounts not as contradictory, but say that the Hebrew account is providing additional, clarifying information to the Genesis account.

11:4-8 It is interesting that the author uses faith to characterize these stories, since Abel, Enoch, and Noah are more noted in Genesis for their righteousness than their faith. Does

that imply the close connection between faith and righteousness? What is the relationship between trust/faith and obedience/righteousness? This could support a hearty discussion.

11:9-19 Fittingly, Abraham gets a lot of ink in this chapter, with the phrase "by faith" being applied to him in three different ways.

11:11 It is interesting that Sarah is said to have been enabled to have Isaac "by faith" even though the Genesis account tells of how she laughed at the prospect. It seems like she was a doubter! Barak's mention in 11:32 seems dubious as well.

11:19 Provides an interesting additional motivation for Abraham's actions.

11:26 is another clear example of Hebrews interpreting the Old Testament Christologically.

11:40 Very interestingly, the reward here isn't the Sabbath rest or a promised land, but being made perfect.

Overall, the text gives heightened attention to Moses and Abraham, and besides that skips along just noting the highlights of each person. The motif of faith becomes more and more prominent as the chapter moves along, until the closing in 11:39 forms a nice bookend of the section with 11:2. These bookends tell us what is important for each of these stories: they remain faithful, and are thus commended. This points us back towards the rhetorical purpose of the chapter, to fill in the color for the argument. The letter overall says, "be a person of faith." This chapter says, "this is what it looks like to be a person of faith."

### **Discussion Areas**

The first two of these areas seem like fertile ground for extensive discussions.

- This text demonstrates well how knowledge of the biblical narratives can be useful to our spiritual lives. The author wants to inspire his readers, so what does he turn to? The biblical stories they already know. He is only able to do that because they have already learned the stories, and so they are fertile ground for inspiration in concrete day to day life. It is worth reflecting on how our lives are influenced by the word. What stories/passages have we found inspirational. If we were going to write to some of our friends and encourage them based on the word, what would we call to memory?
- We might reconstruct the text a second way, callign to mind the people in our lives who have offered inspirational examples of faith. Who is it that has demonstrated faith to us, so that we could see it and desire to follow the example? Note: Most folks can think of a name or two here, but if we press on to make the lists longer, they get much more interesting and specific. I think the best discussion here presses the list four or five deep. That way we get into people who have done specific things, undergone specific tests of faith. Also, if we formulate the answers like the Hebrews 11 text, they get more specific by forcing us to account for actions. "by faith..."
- This text as a whole has a lot to say about what Faith is useful for. Most of the examples in the chapter are about perseverance, and pressing for the unseen over

what is seen. Do we have the type of faith that moves us past what is seen?

## Session 13: Hebrews 12:1-12:13

This week we study another payoff sort of text, one that functions as the climax of much of the book. In fact, I think it is very fair to look at the first couple of verses as summarizing the plea of the letter. This text tells us clearly what the letter is written to accomplish, what the author wants to happen. From there the text offers some encouragement that invites some theological reflections and difficulties, but is demonstrative of a healthy perspective of hardships.

This is a brief text, one of the shortest in our breakdown of Hebrews this spring, but it is rich and dense. There is enough in this passage to meditate on that I believe your class will find it quite rewarding. As a final note, please remember to challenge your class to spend some time committing a few of these verses to memory. It seems that 12:1-2 would be a great candidate for worthy memory work.

### Understanding the Text

12:1-3

This text is not complicated, but profound and brilliant. It is firmly connected to the immediately preceding text highlighting heroes of faith from the past, but also functions as to give a real life focus to all the theological arguments that have been given throughout the letter. One way of demonstrating that is that the "therefore" at 12:1 can logically be read as following almost any other passage in the book, not just the closing verses of chapter 12.

You could say,

"we have a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses..." (paraphrase of 4:15)

"...therefore, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us..."

Or,

"Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account ...(4:13)

"...therefore, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us..."

Or,

"Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant..."

"...therefore, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us..."

Connecting this passage with different parts of Hebrews demonstrates that the text summarizes the rhetorical intent of the letter. However, in a more specific way, the "therefore" is connected with chapter 11, as the text says that it is because we have such a cloud of witnesses that we are encouraged to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Not only is this text intimately connected to chapter 11, but if we look carefully, we can see that it actually completes the picture chapter 11 draws! Who is missing in the list of heroes in chapter 11? Only the best example of all, Jesus! So chapter 12 opens first with the exhortation, then points towards Jesus as an ultimate example. To make this function clear,

imagine substituting the phrase "For the joy set before him" with the words "by faith...", and you can see how what Hebrews tells us about Jesus fits very well with the flow of chapter 11. Jesus is the ultimate example.

Now that the connections have been clarified, what is it that the author is exhorting us to do? There are several components, as we are encouraged:

To throw off everything that hinders

To throw off the sin that entangles

To run with perseverance while focusing on the perseverance of Jesus

All of these things really boil down to taking on a "never give up" attitude, an attitude of focus that refuses to let any sin or hardship get in the way of faith. The threat against someone who takes on such an attitude is that after a while, the goal seems so distant, so far away that it is easy to become discouraged. That's the purpose of the letter, all of the theology of this letter is to encourage the reader to remain faithful, to continue pursuing the goal of faithfulness. More specifically, that's the purpose of the examples of the previous chapter and most importantly the reason for fixing our eyes on Jesus. Verse 3 says that our reason for considering Jesus is so that we won't grow weary and lose heart. The message of Hebrews is: "Press on!"

12:4-12

After this first, very positive word of encouragement, the text turns to a darker word. The text notes, oddly, that they haven't yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood, almost as if to say that in comparison to Jesus and the examples of the previous chapter, what they are undergoing is not really all that bad. This verse gives some interesting information about the original readers, and is a limiting factor to what we might assume after reading 10:32-34. The readers have suffered to be sure, but haven't gone to the most extreme forms of persecution yet. What is the author's reason for pointing this out? He minimizes their suffering a bit before offering a bit of theology that offers further rationale for the principle of "rejoice when others persecute you".

The rationale, most simply stated is that the hardships we endure serve as discipline from God for our growth. There are certainly theological difficulties if we read this text the most natural way, that God actively causes suffering for the sake of his purposes, and those difficulties are only slightly minimized if we interpret the passage as God passively allowing such suffering.

It is important to note that this latter section of the text almost certainly has in mind the wilderness wanderings of the people referred to earlier in the letter. That was a period of hardship endured by the people as a whole for the redemption of the people as a whole, even though it was only the later generation that would enter the promised land. It may be that thinking through the text in that context helps us accept the difficulties above. What may be more telling is that the struggle being engaged in may not be best understood as a threat from physical adversaries. After all, it is in their struggle against **sin** that they have not yet resisted to the point of blood. Ultimately, this text affirms both God's love, power and sovereignty while pointing to a future time of reward that will outweigh present difficulties.

**What we can take away**

This payoff text primarily serves to encourage us against giving up. Perhaps discussion can be had about the things that tempt us to give up, the sins that easily entangle you, or the things that cause us to lose our focus on Christ. In other words, what makes these encouragements challenging?

A second place of discussion may be about what we perceive our hardships to be. What has been difficult that we have already passed through, and were better for it? What is it in our present circumstances that seems like it might be a discipline we need to persevere through?

Finally, what has been our "harvest of righteousness?" What is the reward (not just heaven) of perseverance?

## Session 14: Hebrews 12:14-12:29

As our study winds down, the end of Hebrews adds a few rich layers to the "Don't give up!" message that we have already considered. The major argument has now been concluded, but there is still much to be said, many exhortations to be made that together form a picture of faithfulness in fairly concrete terms. While the message to this point has been the importance and validity of perseverance in faith and obedience, the writer now turns to describe with greater particularity what it looks like to be a person of faithful obedience. These last chapters provide details of discipleship. As such, they are simpler to interpret, and may seem more immediately useful or applicable than some of the theological material that we have already waded through. It is important to note though that all of this material is predicated on the theology that precedes it. While we read more concerning our behavior here, that behavior is based on the beliefs described in the rest of the book. Whenever we attempt to change behavior without examining our beliefs, we run the risk of fostering shallow faith. On the other hand when we examine our faith and train our behavior to flow from that faith, we deepen our faith-lives.

This whole text is not about details of discipleship, though. We have embedded in the middle of all these moral exhortations a strong, poetic section about obedience to God.

### Understanding the Text

12:14-17

The text opens with a pair of exhortations, to live at peace with everyone, and to be holy. These two must be held in balance, because if we are speaking of living at peace with outsiders, our holiness must at times be something that is in conflict with their lives of unbelief. Nonetheless, our holiness cannot be sacrificed for the sake of even relationships. We must somehow remain holy while maintaining peace. This is not only possible, but a necessary part of being holy. Holiness doesn't go around looking for a fight! It searches out peace instead. I find the phrase "make every effort" particularly compelling and haunting in this verse. It is also significant that "without holiness no one will see the Lord."

The next phrase, "see to it that no one misses the grace of God" indicates both the possibility of not laying hold of what God has given. It also contains a strong communal aspect, placing a burden on the community to hold its members up. The next exhortation flows from this, because bitterness within the community holds the possibility of keeping some from laying hold of grace.

Sexual immorality adds another dimension to this set of exhortations, speaking both to one form of unholiness and also perhaps a test of personal discipline. The "godlessness" of Esau points towards the concept of disciplined godly priorities. Esau abandoned the valuable for what was desirable in a moment, and this may specifically be a pointer towards sexual morality. Some things can't be taken back.

12:18-29

The next section may seem like a sudden shift, but it draws upon the tradition of Exodus 19, God's meeting with the people. Thus, the idea of holiness before God is very closely tied to the whole image. Verses 14-17 are about preparing ourselves as holy people before the awesome, holy God that 18 and following describes. The description of the God whom we come to meet serves to heighten the expectation of holiness even beyond that experienced in Exodus. Our meeting with God is even purer than that incredible encounter. The powerful

language of 22-24 is not just inspiration, but humbling. It also subtly gives reference to themes and motifs that have already been in place through the letter: angels, judgment, sanctification, covenant mediation, and even Abel are all mentioned before hand, but here are placed in the context of our experience of God's presence.

The context of the people's meeting with God in Exodus is not a chance, random encounter, though. It is a covenant-making meeting. The acceptance or rejection of God's covenant is a matter of life or death, and the author here is giving us another form of his basic exhortation to remain faithful. This is "don't give up" in other words. The powerful prose with this section continues with a sidebar about the permanence of God's kingdom before concluding with the observation that God is a consuming fire. Thus he is to be approached humbly, and deserves our worship. Approaching God should not be done lightly.

### **What we can take away**

this text shouldn't be too difficult to immediately apply. It's opening verses contain some straightforward moral exhortations, and the latter verses contain some extremely inspirational prose. This is a great text! Here are some suggestions to ways that your class might have further discussion.

First, you might ask which of the moral exhortations seem the most challenging. What is it in this section that is provoking, something we might do well to write on our bathroom mirrors and the dashboards of our cars? What is difficult for us that we need more constant encouragement to follow? These verses can help us look at our own paths of discipleship, and see where we may need to give more attention.

Secondly, the latter section can give us a whole new perspective on what it means to come before God. How does this match up to our experience? Do we perceive the reality of our meeting with God as being this significant? While this section isn't limited to the corporate worship context, it certainly has something to say about that context. Should every Sunday morning feel like Exodus 19, or more significant? That's challenging!

Also, this text is primarily about refusing God. What are the ways that we refuse God, or are in danger of doing so?

Finally, the connection between the two sections offers us another place of discussion. What is the relationship between our meeting with a holy God and our own pursuit of holy living? What is our connection between Sunday and Monday, or to ask the question slightly differently, between Saturday and Sunday?

## Session 15: Hebrews 13:1-13:25

This will be the last section of text for our study of Hebrews, and the character of this text is different than almost all but 12:14-17. In fact, it reads as if 13:1 is resuming after the interruption of 12:18-29 by continuing to flesh out the meaning of a faithful life. It then concludes with the briefest of personal notes and a beautiful doxology that provides a perfect concluding note of encouragement for this letter of exhortation.

### Understanding the Text

The serial, staccato nature of the exhortations of chapter 13 leads this chapter to be easily quotable, and it is most used as a sort of reference chapter for various ethical positions. Here we find admonitions for love, hospitality, submission to leadership, pure sexuality, solidarity with the suffering, greed, service, and a plea for doctrinal purity. These verses probably most often are used independent of each other, and this is not wholly inappropriate. However, we might be well served to learning to read these admonitions as a composite whole. Together they serve to paint a picture of what faithful living looks like. In other words, while this text is normally used for its individual trees, it is worth looking at as a forest.

The ethical content values submissive, caring attitudes which put others above ourselves. As the sacrifice of Jesus has been a dominant theme of the rest of the text, it is natural for the author to translate Jesus' actions into a set of ethics that places the other before ourselves. Also, the text requires an alternative awareness. While we easily become preoccupied with our own needs, Hebrews encourages us to think differently about those whom we meet. Those who need hospitality might be angels, those who suffer should be approached as if it were ourselves who were hurting, and we must consider how our behavior and attitudes affects the spirit of our leaders!

The text also reflects the importance of a holiness that reflects discipline and restraint. This is expressed directly in the prohibition of adultery and greed, which is interestingly placed in the context of trust. Holiness in us is brought by God and serves God's purposes (20-21) but also works for our good. Remaining holy requires us to trust that it is God who sustains our well being. While the earlier theme of service/compassion requires us to see them differently, this theme requires us to perceive our selves differently in relationship to God. Remember that this text is "interrupted" by 12:18-25. That text serves to highlight that our behavior must be conditioned by the perception of a God who will condemn some behaviors and be pleased by others.

That being said, the tone of this text is far from being dark and the holiness prescribed here is far from being unattainable. In fact, the author says of himself that he has a clear conscience and desires to live honorably in every way. It may be that this is a final piece of example to conclude the letter. The audience knows that the author who has written this exhortation strives to live consistently with it, and here is a final piece of testimony that to do so is possible. This is not a boast of personal strength, but a testament to the working of God in the author's life. It is God who has brought holiness to the author, and who is able and ready to do the same for the readers of the letter, both ancient and modern.

Those notes reflect a picture of the forest, but it might be useful for your class to have some notes on some of the specific trees, the individual exhortations and other material. The following represents some of that, although much of this material is fairly transparent.

13:1-2. There is a bit of wordplay behind the scenes here, with two words (phil-adelphia, philo-xenias) indicating that Christians are to be a community that loves, both inside and out. Both our brother (adelphos) and the stranger (xenos) are both to receive our love. Our love is to be inclusive, not restricted to those we know. This is significant!

13:3 This may entail those who are being persecuted for their faith, although that is not explicit. Get involved with jail ministry!

13:4 Marriage is to be honored by all, which probably means more than the further warnings about adultery and sexuality. What does it mean to "honor" marriage? What might it mean to dishonor marriage?

13:5-6 As referenced above, greed here is placed in conversation with contentment and trust. It might be worth discussing how we would feel reading this text in contexts different than our own. For instance we may have little difficulty believing that God will sustain our lives financially, but might we squirm if this text were read publicly in a Haitian church where we were visiting? Perhaps we might be less inclined to understand ourselves as the recipients of God's blessing, and perhaps more as the instruments of blessing. In other words, how might our actions confirm the truthfulness of this text for other communities? How might they deny the truthfulness of these statements?

13:7 (and 17, 24) The first of three references to "leaders" in this chapter. The prominence of the theme here has led many to believe that this letter was written at the request of distressed leaders. The readers are to "remember the lives of...", "obey..." and "greet..." their leaders. The word is not particular to any particular office of leadership, but the reference in 20 to Jesus as a great shepherd is an interesting connection, particularly given the lack of shepherd-talk in the rest of the letter. Hebrews typically thinks of Jesus in different terms.

The latter verse, 17, has some very interesting things to say about leaders. They have authority which comes from responsibility, and following them means that their work can become of advantage to us. Burdening our leaders by bickering, complaining, etc, nullifies the benefit we gain from their leadership.

13:8 This is an interesting text, one that is difficult to read in this context. The surest interpretation is that it is a reference to how the readers will be guided and rewarded in the same ways that their leaders have been. In other words, this is an exhortation to follow in their footsteps because the Lord they trusted has not changed. One of the interesting difficulties with this text is that Hebrews itself is a text that indicates a great deal of change in the way God relates to us, and that gives a measure of description to changes in Jesus' position. Perhaps it is intended to say that while those things have changed, the person and character of Jesus does not. This is difficult to interpret as a statement of Christology divorced from the exhortation in 13:7.

13:9-14 The doctrinal exhortation is difficult to interpret because of the lack of information that we have here about the "strange teachings" in the mind of the author, which he assumes the readers will recognize. It seems to reference some sort of teaching about ceremonial foods, perhaps used by diaspora Jews to keep connected to worship in the temple, or in memory of temple sacrifices if Hebrews was written after the destruction of the temple in AD

70. It is possible that the readers were engaging in such practices with Jews so that they could feel connected with the Jewish community which had ostracized them because of their faith. Thus this would connect well with 13:11-14 which identifies Jesus as someone who went "outside" and encourages the readers to meet him outside the camp, a place of disgrace. Thus, rejecting practices which would save them from disgrace is seen as distancing them from the disgraced outsider Jesus. However appealing they may be, the author reminds us that earthly communities that we might choose instead of faithfulness are temporal, and that we are banking on a future city.

13:15 This verse may be intended to refer to the Christian worship assembly, and might be seen as an alternative to the worshipping Jewish community that in 13:9-14.

13:16 Although 15 encourages us to offer a sacrifice of praise, 16 also encourages us to think of our relationships with others in terms of sacrifice to God. Doing good to others is a no-miss sacrifice! When we limit what we do in service to God, we misunderstand the sacrifices he desires.

13:18-19, 23-25 These verses offer scant information about the author, but there is little here that is particularly identifying. Apparently it is written from Italy by an associate of Timothy's who knew the audience. Unfortunately, that doesn't narrow things down that well!

13:20-21 The doxology is focused on the power of God, both how it has been exercised in the past and how the author prays for its future usage.

### **What we can take away**

This text simply challenges us in a number of different ethical areas, while giving us perspective on our lives regarding our relationships with God, our brothers, strangers, or our leaders. We might easily discuss how each of these relationships affects the others, or which of the relationships we find most difficult to nurture. In which of these relationships do we struggle to be faithful?

How do we feel when we look at this picture of holiness? Does it feel unattainable? If we were writing the doxology more specifically, what might we pray that God would equip us with so that we could live faithfully in light of this text?

What would it mean to be a congregation that chooses to meet Jesus outside the camp? How might we become more disgraceful and yet holy as a people?

What obstacles do we have to living with the perspectives that this chapter describes? What is it that draws our attention continually to ourselves?

## Session 16: Conclusion to Hebrews

Hebrews has been a challenging text for me, and I hope that it has challenged you both in your teaching and in your own faith. As we close the study and turn our attention to other texts, here are some questions for discussion and thoughts for consideration about the book as a whole. In addition to what we have here, you may want to spend some time discussing future study plans, and perhaps matters with individuals and families as we all approach the summer months.

### Wrap-up Discussion Questions

1. What has this book taught you about the work and person of Jesus? What do you think/feel/understand better about who Jesus is and what he has done?
2. How has this book affected the way you think about God's covenant with Israel in the Old Testament? What is your understanding of the old covenant?
3. What texts from this study have you found particularly inspirational or helpful? What seemed like something new, or was surprising? What has proven most challenging?
4. Sometimes it is difficult to read these texts and empathize with the communities of the first century that produced/received them. In what ways have you found yourself saying, "These people really are a lot like us."? Or has the text felt distant?
5. What sums up the message of the book, as it has spoken to you? What would this author have to say to our church, were he to stand before us now?
6. This letter is written as a letter of exhortation, a word of encouragement to act faithfully. In what ways do we need and receive encouragement from our own community? What ways do we need more encouragement?
7. As a part of the memory challenge that we introduced at the beginning of the study, have you been able to engage in that challenge? How has it been beneficial, or why did we fail in that challenge?

### Closing thoughts

A. This text has some difficulties in study, not the least of which is the long sustained argument in the middle of the book. However, the benefit of studying such a text is that we gain a very thorough understanding of the basis of our faith and confidence in the Lord. Hebrews has shown us how completely Jesus has dealt with our guilt before God! This is cause for great gratitude and worship! One of the benefits to me has been the chance to reflect on how amazing the salvation we receive is.

B. This text has also been useful because of its level of difficulty. It is a text that challenges our minds and forces us to really think, and that's a good thing. Sometimes it has made me read the section at hand multiple times before getting a good grip on what it was saying, and there have been times when I've had to seek out answers better than what I could come up with on my own! That's a good thing, too! What do you think about how we balance studies like this? Can a study be too challenging, so that we lose interest and become discouraged and more distant from the scriptures? Can a study be too easy, so that we end up only studying the basics over and over again and never move on to meatier subjects and deeper maturity? Which do we more often risk?

C. Finally, let us all be encouraged by this study to never, ever give up when it comes to our faith. Let our determination to follow Christ in times of ease or times of difficulty, in times of struggle and in times of victory. Let this text serve as a place where we covenant together to help each other in faith, encouraging each other. And let us be mindful of our covenant with God, by which he redeems those who remain faithful.

**Be Faithful!**