

STUDIES IN HEBREWS

James W. Thompson

CONSIDERATIONS IN TEACHING THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

1. Because of the dense theological language of Hebrews, especially 7:1-10:18, Hebrews is intimidating for most people.
2. The teacher can overcome this intimidation best by noting the sermonic character of Hebrews and discovering that the book was written for a practical purpose.
 - a. The teacher should read through the letter several times in order to get a grasp of the message of the entire book.
 - b. In reading through the book, we will notice that, unlike Paul's letters, this book is interspersed with practical exhortations after each theological argument (2:1-4; 3:6, 14; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39).
 - c. The teacher should note the author's preference for "let us" passages; that is, all of the theological parts are aimed toward motivating the readers.
 - d. Although Hebrews has 13 chapters (perfect for a three-month study!), this curriculum will not be divided into chapters, but will divide study units in such a way that the lesson for the week will reflect the integration of practical advice with theological statement.
3. The teacher will note the strangeness of Hebrews; despite the title page in some Bibles ("the letter of Paul the apostle to the Hebrews"), the book is not a letter, is not from Paul, and the readers are never identified as Hebrews.
 - a. The book is a "word of exhortation" (13:22), probably the oldest known sermon to a Christian audience.
 - b. The author belongs to the second generation (2:1-4), claims no apostolic authority for himself, and never identifies himself. He may be a student of Paul's.
 - c. The title "Hebrews" was given in the second century based on the content of the book; nothing in the book specifically says that the readers are Hebrews.
4. The major challenge for the teacher is to ensure that the focus remains on the practical aspects of Hebrews; that is, one should not become trapped into speculations about a) who the author is [we don't know]; b) who Melchizedek was [a mystery]; or c) the furnishings of the tabernacle. The focus should be on the practical point the author is making, which becomes clear in the exhortation that come after the theoretical part.
5. Each week's lesson should keep before the class the setting of the original recipients of Hebrews.
 - a. Although traditional interpretations have indicated that the readers are tempted to return to Judaism, nothing in the book actually suggests this setting.
 - b. As the first lesson will demonstrate, the numerous references to the situation of the readers indicates that they belonged to the second generation, and that they were discouraged and in need of renewal ("drooping hands and weak knees," 12:12).
 - c. The effectiveness of the class will depend on our ability to connect their situation with ours. What does one say to a church that has lost its enthusiasm.

SUGGESTED CURRICULUM FOR HEBREWS

1. Week One: A Sermon for our Time (Hebrews)
2. Week Two: Opening Words (Heb. 1:1-4)
3. Week Three 1:5-2:4. Pay Attention to What You Have Heard
4. Week Four: 2:5-18. The Pioneer who Goes Before Us
5. Week Five: 3:1-19. Lessons from the Past
6. Week Six. 4:1-13. Listening to God's Word
7. Week Seven. 4:14-5:10. Our Great High Priest
8. Week Eight. 5:11-6:12. Moving on to Perfection
9. Week Nine 6:13-7:28. The Certainty of the Promise
10. Week Ten. 8:1-10:25. Why Go to Church?
11. Week Eleven. 10:26-11:40. Heroes of Faith
12. Week Twelve. 12:1-29. A Heavenly Worship Service
13. Week Thirteen. 13:1-25. Going Outside the Camp

FOR FURTHER READING

DeSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"*: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Koester, Craig. *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2001

Lane, William. *Hebrews*. 2 vols. Dallas: Word, 1991

Schenck, Kenneth, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews*. Louisville: WJK, 2004

Thompson, James, *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

Thompson, James, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Austin: Sweet, 1971

Thompson, James, *Strategy for Survival*. Austin: Sweet, 1980

WEEK ONE. A SERMON FOR OUR TIME

1. The genius of our Bible is that certain books "come alive" at particular moments because they speak to the problems of a particular time. [Class members might be asked to recall occasions when a book of the Bible seemed to speak to their situation.] In this series we want to hear what the letter to the Hebrews says to us.
2. Class members might be asked to recall what memories of Hebrews they have: details from Hebrews; verses remembered, etc. That is, what place does it have in our memory? [The teacher might check the index of the hymnal to see what hymns are based on Hebrews.]
3. Hebrews is actually a mysterious book ("like Melchizedek," one of its characters): we know nothing of the author or the audience.
 - a. It is an anonymous book to an unknown community.
 - i. All we know about the author is that he belongs to the second generation (2:1-4).
 - ii. The author is well educated; he speaks in the most elegant style of any writer of the New Testament.
 - iii. The importance of the book is not on the identity of the author or community, but on what the letter says.
 - b. The book does not have the characteristics of a letter from Paul [Compare the introduction to Hebrews with the introduction to Paul's letters]. The author calls this work a "word of exhortation" (13:22), the term for a sermon (cf. Acts 13:15).
4. We understand the letter (as we do any sermon) best if we ascertain the situation of the community to which this sermon is addressed. Let's draw a profile of the readers.
 - a. They and the author belong to the second generation (2:1-4), and they are in danger of "drifting away."
 - b. There is a danger that they will not "hold fast" (3:6, 14) to their faith.
 - c. Although they are not new Christians, they have made no progress in learning about the faith; nor have any become teachers (5:11-14).
 - d. They are in danger of "falling away" (6:4).
 - e. Some are abandoning the assembly (10:25).
 - f. They have received hostile treatment from their neighbors (10:32-35).
 - g. They need perseverance (10:36).
 - h. They have "drooping hands and weak knees" (12:12).
 - i. Nothing is said in the references about a particular false teaching that threatens the church; the problem is that second-generation Christians have lost the enthusiasm they once had. [Note: Traditional interpreters have assumed that the readers are considering a return to Judaism. However, the descriptions of the community's situation point only to their general apathy and discouragement.]

- j. *The cumulative effect of these passages is to imagine a community of the second generation wondering if it is worth it to remain a Christian.* We should imagine a minority group made up of people who have left their own families to belong to this group. Here they are abandoned by their own families. At first they were enthusiastic. But now the years have gone by, and they ask: is it worth it?
 - k. Discussion: Has it been your experience that movements work that way? Give examples where the passage of time leaves people less enthusiastic about the cause that they first believed in.
5. One of the distinctive features of Hebrews is the author's manner of interspersing exhortations between doctrinal sections (2:1-4; 4:14-16; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39). These exhortations indicate that doctrinal teaching and exhortation cannot be separated in the author's mind. All of the teaching is aimed at giving the readers a reason to continue in the faith.
 6. Why is Hebrews a sermon for our time? Compare the situation now with that of the readers of Hebrews. In what ways do we see people asking is it worth it to remain a Christian?
 - a. Do Christians have a minority status like those of the readers of Hebrews?
 - b. Describe the challenges we face in maintaining the commitment of church members; of convincing the next generation that it is worth it to be a Christian.
 - c. Why has church attendance become a problem?
 7. Before reading Hebrews, suggest the means that you would suggest for bringing about renewal in the church.
 8. Hebrews is a surprising renewal book. It compares favorably with Romans as the "heaviest" theological book of the New Testament. [Note: the teacher may wish to read sample passages to indicate the depth of the message of Hebrews—the first chapter, perhaps] Compare the author's approach to renewal with our own suggestions.
 9. In the coming weeks, we will note the author's means of getting his readers back in church (10:25).

WEEK TWO: OPENING WORDS (1:1-4)

1. We have seen that the author of Hebrews faces a daunting challenge: speaking to readers who almost didn't come to the assembly; that is, "some" are already neglecting the assembly (10:25), and the listeners have "drooping hands and weak knees" (12:12).
2. Opening words are important, especially under these circumstances. [Discussion: What are the basic guidelines for introducing a speech that we learn in school? How do you introduce a speech to listeners who are already apathetic about the message? What suggestions would you have given to the author of Hebrews for introducing his speech to an apathetic audience?]
3. It matters not only what we say, but how we say it. In Greek as well as many English translations, verses 1-4 are poetry. [Note: Have members of the class read 1:1-4 in several translations. Ask the class if they can describe what is poetic about these verses.]
 - a. In Greek, 1:1-4 is all one sentence marked by parallelism.
 - b. The rhythm of this prologue suggests that some messages must be said in poetry or song; prose is inadequate to express the message.
 - c. Discussion: Why would the author introduce a message to an apathetic church with this style? What did the style communicate about the nature of the message? Perhaps he was so moved by the message that he had to say it in poetry.
4. What is the message that the author wants to communicate in the opening words to a tired church? Verses 1-4 summarize the message of the entire sermon.
 - a. In 1:1-2a he contrasts God's revelation in the Old Testament to his ultimate revelation in the son. This prepares the way for the sermon's constant use of contrasts between the institutions of the Old Testament and the Christian story. Note the contrast between the "many and various" revelations and the final one in Jesus Christ.
 - b. In 1:2b-3a he describes the role of Jesus at the creation (cf. John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:6-11).
 - c. In 1:3b he summarizes the earthly work of Jesus with the one phrase, "having made purification for sins" (a reference to the cross and anticipation of chs. 9-10).
 - d. In 1:3c-4 he describes the heavenly enthronement of Jesus, a theme that continues throughout the sermon.
 - e. "Better than the angels" introduces the constant theme of Hebrews that Jesus is "better than ..." (Moses, the priesthood of Aaron; he offers a better sacrifice in a better tabernacle, etc.). It also introduces chapters 1-2, which compare Jesus with the angels.
 - f. In the series of comparisons ("better than...") the author, reminds apathetic Christians of the primary reason why they should remain faithful: Jesus is Christ is superior to anything to which we might compare him. **Discussion: If the author of Hebrews were writing today, to what would he compare Jesus Christ?**

That is, what are the alternative "religions" of today?

- g. The basic message of verses 1-4 is that Jesus Christ is God's ultimate revelation—not something we place alongside other objects of devotion.

Why begin a sermon to a tired church this way? He doesn't say anything that they have not heard before. The readers have probably heard these words many times before. Why not something new and original? The author is communicating, especially through this poetry, that this message still moves him. **The answer for this apathetic church was to hear once more the message to which they responded at the beginning.** He shows that he still experiences a sense of wonder at that original message, and he wants his listeners to share it.

- a. Example: We have heard the Star Spangled Banner many times. When we lived in Germany during a time of national crisis (hostages in Iran, etc.), I recall watching the U.S. play the Soviets in hockey (probably the first hockey game I ever watched). For the first time, I was moved by the playing of the Star Spangled Banner.
- b. We hear a great piece of music like Handel's Messiah each year and never cease to be moved by the power. That is, old messages can retain their power.
- c. Discuss other examples when we rediscover the power of words or experiences that we have known for a long time.

Peter Berger, a well-known sociologist, once wrote that the Christianity that will survive into the 21st century will not be the kind that constantly attempts to be relevant, but the kind that has a set of clear convictions. **Discuss whether you consider that to be true. Others have noted the "graying of many churches" and concluded that those that are in decline offered no reason to stay.** According to Hebrews 1:1-4, what convictions are central for us to communicate?

WEEK THREE: PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD (1:5-2:4)

1. In the previous lesson we have seen the introduction to the author's sermon on church renewal. The author's lyrical introduction indicated why it is worth it to remain a Christian: because nothing else compares with the revelation we have heard in Christ. He concluded this unit by saying that Christ, who is at God's right hand, has become "greater than angels" insofar as he has received a more excellent name than that of the angels.
2. In 1:5-14 the author illustrates the claim made in 1:1-4 with a series of Scripture citations that illustrate Jesus' superiority to the angels.
 - a. The "more excellent name" is that of "son"—one who holds a special relationship to the father.
 - i. Although angels are sometimes called "sons of God" in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 6:2-4; Job 38:7; Ps. 29:1; 89:6), Hebrews indicates that Jesus is Son of God in a special way as a result of his enthronement to God's right hand.
 - ii. The introductory phrase in 1:5 ("to what angel did he ever say. . .") suggests that only Jesus is the Son of God.
 - b. In 1:5-6, the author quotes two Old Testament passages to illustrate that Jesus is the Son of God.
 - i. Note that he reads the Old Testament consistently through the "lenses" of the story of Christ; that is, instead of reading the OT passages in their original context, he sees a deeper meaning that points to Christ.
 - ii. In 1:5, he quotes Ps. 2:7, a declaration by God (probably at the coronation of the king) to the royal figure. Note that part of this passage is also quoted at Jesus' baptism (cf. Mark 1:11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:7).
 - iii. Throughout Hebrews, Jesus has two major titles: son and high priest; chs. 1-4 focus primarily on Jesus as "son."
 - iv. In 1:6, the author quotes from 2 Sam. 7:14, a passage originally spoken to David and indicating that his descendants would be God's son. In Jewish literature, this became the favorite passage to describe the Messiah.
 - v. In 1:6, he refers to the moment when Jesus entered the heavenly world as the occasion for saying, "Let all the angels worship him" (cf. Deut. 32:43; the quotation is based on the Greek translation of the OT). This continues the thought of the superiority of the son to the angels.
 - c. In verses 7-12, the Scripture quotations describe how Jesus is greater than the angels.
 - i. Verses 7 and 8 present a contrast between angels and the son. The son is "forever" (v. 8), while angels are changeable (into winds or flaming fire).
 - ii. In verses 9-12 repeat the content of 1:1-4, indicating that the Son is above everything else (v. 9); was present at the creation (v. 10); and is eternal and unchangeable (vss. 10-12).
 - iii. Verses 13-14 conclude the contrast; the son is at God's right hand (v. 13),

while angels are only servants (v. 14).

3. Why the contrast between Christ and the angels? Some have suggested that the listeners are tempted to worship angels. However, the text never indicates that the readers have a problem with the worship of angels. It is more likely that Christians were trying to determine the category to which Jesus belonged. Was he man? Angel? Because angels were more than human, the author wishes to show that Jesus is above all of the categories where we might want to place him. Note that the focus of the Scripture references is on Jesus who alone belongs at God's right hand. Consequently, he is eternal and unchangeable.

4. Why this extended theological discussion in a sermon to an apathetic church? 2:1-4 indicates the "so what" of the author's reflections on Jesus.
 - a. According to 2:1, the people are in danger of "drifting away" and "neglecting" (2:3) their salvation.
 - b. The focus of 2:1-4 is: such a great salvation (as in ch. 1) has greater consequences for those who disobey.
 - c. According to 2:2, the author assumes that disobedience in God's previous revelation carried severe consequences for disobedience (cf. OT references for the consequences of disobedience in Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 28:15-68).
 - d. According to 2:3 this word spoken by the Lord is a "great salvation" (i.e., greater than the one mentioned in 2:2) that leaves disobedient people without an escape. That is, great salvation brings great consequences for disobedience.
 - e. In 2:4, the author's comments about signs and miracles is intended to support the claim that Christians have received a "great salvation."
 - f. One of the themes of Hebrews, much in evidence here, is that one does not trifle with God; the theme of judgment is found at several places (cf. 4:13; 6:4-6; 10:26-31; 12:29).

5. Note that we should consider 1:5-2:4 as a single unit; theology and exhortation belong together. The author seems to be saying that Christians "neglect" their salvation because they lose sight of the sense of its greatness. **Discussion: a) Describe occasions when we become so accustomed to something priceless that we lose any sense of amazement. b) Discuss the challenge of "paying attention" to something that we have heard many times.**

6. **Discuss your response to the author's motivation for Christians to remain faithful. What do you think of his appeal to fear? Do you consider such a motivation effective for the contemporary church?**

WEEK FOUR: THE PIONEER WHO GOES BEFORE US (2:5-18)

1. Remember that the fundamental question that the author of Hebrews addresses is: Is it worth it to be a Christian.
2. In 2:5 the author continues the series of Scripture citations that are intended to demonstrate that Christ is greater than the angels. However, instead of citing a series of passages, as in ch. 1, in 2:5-18 he reflects on one major passage, Ps. 8:5-7.
 - a. In its original context, Ps. 8 is a meditation on the beauty of the universe and the place of humanity within it ("what is man that you are mindful of him"). [Someone in the class should read Ps. 8]
 - b. As in ch. 1, the author reads the psalm through the lenses of Christ, who is the "son of man" of the psalm.
 - c. The last line of the passage ("he has put all things under his feet," Heb. 2:8) is linked to Ps. 110:1 (quoted in 1:13, "until I put all enemies under your feet)."
3. The focal point of the citation in 2:6-8 is the continuation of the theme of the greatness of Christ in relation to the angels. The rest of the chapter is an interpretation of the psalm.
4. In 2:8b, the author indicates that "we do not see" what is claimed in the psalm: the world subjected to the Christ. That is, we experience a gap between our claims and the reality we know. In chapter 11, the author will insist that faith involves "seeing the invisible"—an apparent contradiction in terms (cf. 11:2, 6,27). Although we affirm that God rules the world through Christ, much that we see seems to deny our claims. This is the situation faced by the readers of Hebrews and a source of their discouragement. It would be easy to maintain our enthusiasm if we saw unquestioning proof everyday that God is in control.

Discussion: Do we have a place in our discussions for the kind of honesty that the author displays when he admits "we do not see the world in subjection to him?"
5. Verses 9-18 answer the challenge to faith that the author raises in 2:8b. How can we be faithful when we are asked to go on without seeing the evidence of God's power?
 - a. In 2:9, the author responds to the challenge to faith by saying that "we see Jesus as the one crowned with glory and honor after the suffering of death." What we can see is Jesus. Before he was crowned, he suffered a shameful death. The author interprets the words of the psalm, "a little (while) lower than the angels" as a statement that Jesus was below the angels during his earthly life before he was above the angels. The story of Jesus was not only victory, but also included pain and suffering. Discussion: Some want the crown without the cross. Jesus' cross was the prerequisite for the crown.
 - b. In verses 10-13, the author indicates Jesus' solidarity with the community in its struggle.
 - i. Jesus is the pioneer/captain/author (Greek *archegos*) who leads the way to glory through suffering (2:10). Note the theme of Jesus as forerunner in

- Hebrews (cf. 6:20). He is the "trailblazer."
- ii. Verses 11-13 indicate how closely united Christ is with humanity. The author assumes that Jesus is the speak in the passages that he quotes.
- (1) V. 11 says that Jesus is our brother.
 - (2) Verse 12 reiterates that Christ is our brother (citation from Psalm 22:23).
 - (3) V. 13 ("I will put my trust in him") even indicates that Jesus's solidarity with us included his need to trust God, just as everyone is called to trust God.
 - (4) V. 13b (cit. Isa. 8:18). reiterates Jesus' family relationship with believers.

No book of the Bible emphasizes as clearly as Hebrews does that Jesus is exalted above the universe (as in Heb. 1). No book emphasizes the humanity of Jesus as clearly as Hebrews does. 2:5-18 is the first of three major treatments of Jesus' humanity in the sermon (cf. 4:15; 5:7-8). Verses 14-18 emphasize the full humanity of Jesus.

- a. According to verses 14-15 Jesus' humanity is evident in the fact that he experienced death and rescued those who live in fear of death; that is, he experienced fully what it means to be human.
- b. In v. 17a, he was "like his brothers in every respect." The emphasis is: Even if we do not see his glory in our moments of distress, we can take courage in the fact that he has experienced what we now experience.
- c. **Discussion: Describe the significance of the full humanity of Jesus in our own understanding of the Christian faith. What do we mean by "like his brothers in every respect?" Many of us are more comfortable talking about Jesus' divinity than his full humanity. Did Jesus know what it means to doubt? To fear death? To be discouraged?**
- d. The author's primary point must be seen in the context of the temptations facing the readers. They are discouraged, perhaps also doubting. The author isn't giving theoretical speculation about Jesus' humanity, but a word of encouragement about Jesus as one who has stood where we are.

Verses 17b-18 give the practical consequences of the teaching about the humanity of Jesus.

- a. A discouraged church can take heart in the fact that Jesus was one of us; he didn't go from one victory to another. Victory came only through death.
- b. He can be merciful because he was like us (v. 18).
- c. Note that 2:17 is the first reference in the book to Jesus as high priest.

Reflect on the message of this unit as it answers the question, is it worth it to be a Christian? How would this message be helpful for our own situation as we face apathy and discouragement?

WEEK FIVE: LESSONS FROM THE PAST (3:1-19)

1. Remember the basic question that Hebrews attempts to answer for a marginalized people: Is it worth it to undergo the suffering and discouragement?
2. Hebrews seems to recycle the same argument throughout the letter: Jesus is "better." This claim is normally followed by an exhortation indicating that the superiority of the Christian message is the basis for renewed commitment (cf. 1:5-2:4). In 3:1-4:11 we see the same pattern. In 3:1-6 the author reflects on Jesus' relation to Moses (3: 1-6a) before he encourages the people to remain faithful (3:6b-4:11). Because of the length of this unit, we will limit this unit to chapter 3.
3. In Jewish tradition no one was in the class of Moses. Note how much space Moses receives in the Old Testament: from Exodus 1 through Deuteronomy he is the mediator with God. Jewish tradition looked forward to the time when God would send a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15ff). This fact makes Moses an appropriate object of comparison for Jesus. An especially important background to our passage is Numbers 12:7, the basis for the reflections in Heb. 3:1-6. One should read the larger context of Numbers 12 to see how great Moses was.
4. We note the comparison made in Hebrews 3: 1-6a.
 - a. In 3:1-2, Jesus is identified as high priest for the second time (cf. 2:17) and compared to Moses who was "faithful in God's house" (Num. 12:7).
 - b. In 3:3-6a, the author shows that Jesus is greater than Moses.
 - i. Greater because the builder is greater than the house (v. 3).
 - ii. Greater because the son is greater than Moses, the servant. Note that the same distinction (servant/son) is made between Christ and angels in 1:14.
 - iii. In 6a, the author reassures the community, saying "we are his house." This passage is surely a way of reassuring people who were marginalized in their own world. This reassures them that they belong to something important.
 - iv. **Discussion: The readers of this letter had probably become apathetic and weary because of the burden of being a small minority group. The pressure of belonging to a small minority was wearisome. Reflect on the current situation. Is the problem of maintaining commitment related to the sense that we are a marginalized people. Note 3:6a, which seems to say: You are somebody! Do we need such an assurance in our world?**
5. In 3:6b the author turns to exhortation based on the assurance that he gave. The assurance of 3:6a is now followed by a conditional phrase: "if we hold fast." The outcome is not a certainty.
6. In 3:7-4:11 the author gives one long commentary on the passage from Psalm 95:7-11. Hebrews is a series of commentaries on specific passages. This one follows naturally from

the "if clause in 3:7. That is, salvation is no guarantee, as the lesson from the past indicates.

- a. Psalm 95 is a call to worship that is familiar to most of us; a contemporary song is based on it. One should read the entire psalm in context.
 - i. "Therefore" in 3:7 introduces the psalm and connects to the preceding phrase in 3:6b.
 - ii. 3: 7b-11 quote the psalm with minor variations from the Greek translation (Septuagint). [The class may want to compare the passage in our Bibles with the reading in Hebrews.]
 - (1) The psalm passage looks back to two OT passages (Exod. 15:23; 17:7; cf. Num. 14:21-23) when the Israelites tested God and were punished.
 - (2) The quotation concludes with the stern warning that God once gave Israel: "They will never enter my rest" (promised land).
 - iii. In verses 12-19, the author gives the first part of his commentary on that ancient story.
 - (1) The author interprets the passage as a word for the present community, a warning that they could suffer the same fate if they fall away (v. 12).
 - (2) According to v. 13, they should overcome their current temptation by "encouraging" each other every day. That is, a small minority group must have social cohesion in order to survive. The encouragement is the obligation of everyone in the community.
Discussion: What means do we have in our situation to actually practice this?
 - (3) The "today" of the psalm is still "today"; this warning continues to speak to us.
 - (4) Verses 16-19 indicates that *all* who left Egypt perished (no mention of Joshua and Caleb). The reason: unbelief (v. 19).
 - (5) This ancient example is the opposite of ch. 11, which gives examples of faithful people. Here is the example of unbelief.
- b. **Discussion: Note the function of negative examples; the motivation supplied by warnings from the past. Reflect on the lessons we learn from history. How do stories from the past serve as a warning? What do you think of the author's means of persuasion in this lesson: from a positive statement in 3:1-6 to a warning in 3:7-19?**

LESSON SIX: LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD (4:1-13)

1. Reflect on the "big picture" of Hebrews: Is it worth it to remain faithful?
2. In the preceding lesson, we noted that the author proceeded from a statement of how great Christ is (3:1-6a) to a warning of the consequences of failure (3:6b-19). The author found an appropriate warning in his quotation of Psalm 95:7-11, God's stern judgment that the Israelites would not enter the promised land. In today's lesson, we continue with the author's commentary on that psalm.
3. In verses 4:1-2 the author repeats the warning, indicating that those who have heard the same good news as their ancestors should learn the consequences of not having faith. [Here "faith" has more the connotation of "faithfulness"—perseverance in the midst of obstacles}.
4. In verse 3, the author turns from warning to a promise: those who believe (persevere), in contrast to those who do not believe, enter God's rest. That is, "God's rest" is still available. Here we note that the passage in the Old Testament was actually talking about entering the promised land, Canaan. If it is possible for believers still to enter God's rest, he has shifted the meaning of "rest." Now it apparently is referring to heaven, inasmuch as he is not talking about the literal promised land of Canaan. This is the promise for those who persevere.
5. In verses 4 and 5 the author indicates how he arrived at the conclusion that rest=heaven. Using a common mode of interpretation among the rabbis, he links two passages that contain the word "rest" and concludes that "rest" means the same thing in both instances. First he quotes once more from Ps. 95:11 ("they shall never enter my rest"); then he quotes from Gen. 2:2: "God rested in the seventh day." Therefore "rest" = God's rest (in heaven).
6. Based on these two Scriptures, the author concludes in verses 7-10 that the "rest" mentioned in the Old Testament is still available. He returns to the word "today" in the psalm to conclude that a) Joshua never brought the people into the rest; and b) there is a new "today" in which Christians can enter. Because Christians see a destiny, they can persevere. **Discussion: Describe instances in which you decided that perseverance was worth it because you could see the goal. To what extent is our own lack of perseverance related to the loss of a genuine future hope? What has happened to the Christians' focus on the heavenly rest? Compare the hymns of a century ago with our own and note the emphasis on the future in the older hymns. Note how many hymns turn the promised land into a metaphor for heaven (i.e., "On Jordan's Stormy Banks..."). Can you name some of the hymns?**
7. In verse 11, exhortation follows the assurance offered in verses 3-9. This is spoken to

people who are tempted to drop out. It is worth it to continue because we know the goal. If we lose a sense of future hope, we will not persevere. 8. Verses 12-13 end the first major section of Hebrews. Note that 1:1-2 and 4:12-13 are like bookends for this section; 1:1 describes how God "has spoken," while 4:12-13 speak of the power of the word of God. We must ask here how verses 12-13 fit the context. At first glance, they seem to stand alone. Most likely, these verses form a conclusion to the lesson from Scripture in 3:7-4:11. According to the psalm, "God swore in his wrath." Here he describes the word of God.

- a. The "word of God" here refers to the Scripture quotation from Psalm 95. It is "living and active" insofar as it is not locked in the past; it continues to address the congregation. The opposite of "living" is "empty." See Deut. 32:47; Isa 55:11. Elijah: "There shall be no dew nor rain except by my word" (1 Kgs 17:1). See Jer 1: 9f; 5:14; 23:9. It is like fire, like a hammer which breaks the rocks in pieces, cf. Isa 40:8.
- b. The accent in vss. 12-13 is on the imagery of two edged sword that is so sharp that it can slice what no one could ever slice (between soul and spirit). The emphasis is on the power of the word to stand in judgment on the reader, who is fully exposed while reading. That is, the word is not a weapon to use on others, but something that does surgery on the reader. The author is confronting the listeners with a judging word that leaves them naked when they confront it.
- c. **Discussion: Reflect on the purposes of Bible study. Consider the comment by my teacher, "Whenever you read the Bible and it makes you self-righteous, you misunderstood it." The same teacher said that when we read stories, we naturally identify with the characters. But we should not identify with the heroes, but with the "other guys." That is, we are not Jesus in the story; perhaps we are the Pharisees. We are not Paul; perhaps we are the Galatians are the Corinthians. How might we learn to read Scripture in the way that the author of Hebrews read Scripture?**
- d. **Discussion: Do you find that the reading of the Bible has diminished in the church's educational program? If so, why has the Bible lost its special place in the church? Give examples of instances where you found the Bible was doing surgery on you.**

WEEK SEVEN: OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST (4:14-5:10)

1. Remember that Hebrews is answering the question: is it worth it to remain faithful.
2. We noticed in the previous lesson that 1:1 and 4:12-13 are like bookends. These two passages talk about the power of God's word. Between these passages the author's exhortations have been based reflections that Jesus is "better than angels/Moses." It is worth it to remain faithful because of this great salvation. The primary title for Jesus is "son" (1:5; 3:1-6). In the new section, note that 4:14-16 and 10:19-25 are also "bookends" with exhortations to draw near because the high priest has opened the way. Between the two bookends are extended reflections about Jesus the high priest.
3. Consistent with the rest of the book, the author's exhortation (4:14-16) is based on his theology (5:1-10).
4. In 4:14-16 the author begins with an exhortation.
 - a. Although 4:14 assumes (note "therefore") that the listeners know that "we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens," Jesus' high priesthood has been mentioned only in 2:17. The author has established that Jesus is enthroned above the heavens. Jesus' status is the basis for the exhortation, "Let us hold fast the confession." "Hold fast" suggests that they are in danger of letting their salvation slip away. The "confession" is the confession of faith—perhaps the one they made at their baptism. That is, we "hold fast" because we know that we have something transcendent to hold on to.
 - b. Note "for" in v. 15; that is, we can "hold fast" not only because Christ is the heavenly high priest, but because we have a "sympathetic" high priest who has been tempted as we are (cf. 2:17). The author's primary point is not a theoretical statement about all of Jesus' temptations, but the assurance that Jesus was so human that he shared precisely the temptations that the readers now experience—especially the temptation to quit. **Discussion: Reflect on your understanding of the humanity of Jesus and his temptations. Did Jesus doubt? Become discouraged? Consider not going to Jerusalem to challenge the authorities? How effective would the author's reflections on Jesus' temptations be when we consider our own discouragements?**
 - c. Note "therefore" in v. 16: Because Jesus shared our temptations (v. 15) and has gone into heaven (v. 14), "let us draw near with boldness." The author suggests that Jesus opened the possibility for us to come before God. "Draw near" is a favorite phrase in Hebrews (7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). It was the word in the Old Testament for the priest who drew near to God at the tabernacle. Here the author speaks of a marvelous opportunity for Christians that is possible only through the work of Christ. The phrase may be a reference to prayer or corporate worship.

5. In 5:1 -10 the author begins the long section (extending until 10:18) on the high priest, tabernacle, and sacrifice. This long section, sandwiched between two exhortations, is intended to give the listeners reasons not to abandon the faith. Having introduced the subject of priesthood (2:17; 3:1), the author now gives the "job description" of a high priest (5:1-4) and then shows that Christ qualifies for the job.
- a. For the job description of the high priest in the OT, see Exod. 28:45f; Lev 16:17; Lev 9:7 draw near to the altar. Num 15:22-25; Lev 16:9.
 - b. The author of Hebrews mentions only two aspects of the priesthood.
 - i. He offers sacrifice for sins (5:1, 3), "being able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray" (v. 2). The OT says nothing about his "dealing gently" with sinners. This word (*metriopatheiri*) was the word for the golden mean between apathy and harshness. It is a contrast to *sympathein* (4:15), the total "feeling with" another person.
 - ii. He must be called by God (v. 4).
 - c. Verses 5-10 are parallel to vss. 1-4: Christ fits the job description (i.e., the author drew up the job description with Christ in mind).
 - i. Verses 5-6 quote two passages that demonstrate that Jesus was called (or appointed). The first passage ("you are my son...") is from Ps. 2:7, and was quoted already in 1:5. The second passage is from Ps. 110:4 and introduces a theme (Melchizedek) that the author will discuss in ch. 7. Together, the two passages show that Jesus was appointed both son and high priest.
 - ii. Verses 7-10 develop the theme (5:2) of the priest's solidarity with people. The passage emphasizes once more (cf 2:17; 4:15) the solidarity of Jesus with humans. He "deals gently" (v. 2) because he shared suffering and the fear of death. The passage reminds us of Jesus in Gethsemane, but also uses the language of the psalms (cf. Ps. 116:8). Scholars debate what is meant by "he prayed to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard." In what way was he heard?
 - iii. The conclusion in verse 9 indicates that the story of Jesus is not just abstract theology. Jesus was "made perfect" (completed his work in death) and is now the source of eternal salvation for those who obey. A great story of salvation offers incredible opportunities for Christians. They should not want to throw this opportunity away.
 - iv. In 5:10 the author mentions Melchizedek for the second time. Although he doesn't develop the theme yet, it is obvious that he is pointing to a priesthood far better than any the listeners have known.
6. The major point of this unit is to show that the greatness of salvation is the motivation for preserving it. **Discussion: What are analogies in your own experience of a possession that you would preserve at all costs? Have you ever taken something for granted only to discover later that you had been very casual about something that was priceless? The listeners have begun to take the Christian story for granted, and the author is trying to create a new sense of wonder. How do we deal with an "old**

story" that has become too familiar? Compare our response to that of the author of Hebrews.

WEEK EIGHT: MOVING ON TO PERFECTION (5:11-6:12)

We have seen that Hebrews alternates exhortation with theological reflection to show why it is worth it to remain a Christian. In 5:6, 10 the author introduced the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, but did not elaborate. After the reference in 5:10, we would expect him to develop this theme. However, the reference to Melchizedek leads to the longest exhortation in the book of Hebrews. This unit interrupts the theme of Melchizedek, which is not developed until ch. 7.

Although English translations do not point this out, 5:11 and 6:12 have "bookends" that introduce and conclude the section. The NIV "slow to learn" (nothroi) in 5:11 is equivalent to the NIV "lazy" in 6:12. The same Greek word is used. This word indicates the problem that the author of Hebrews is addressing.

Reference to Melchizedek in 5:10 leads the author to pause and say "we have much to say about this that is hard to explain, but you have become dull of hearing." "Dull of hearing" was a common phrase for a school child who was making no progress. This is the only direct indictment in the entire book.

- a. The language of childhood learning continues in 5:12, which could be rendered, "you need someone to teach you the abcs."
- b. The book of Hebrews says little about church offices; here he indicates that the whole church should be teachers.
- c. "Milk" and "solid food" were common metaphors for learning.
- d. The key to the church's survival, according to 5:13-14, is solid food and exercise. 5:14 uses the image of athletic training to describe the exercise of the mind.
- e. **Discussion: One writer has said that Hebrews 5:11-14 is "the most intellectual" passage in the New Testament; i.e., it demands the growth, nutrition, and exercise of the mind, indicating that education is indispensable for the health and vitality of the church. Would the author's view gain wide acceptance today? Some approaches focus primarily on the importance of being accessible to the unchurched, using simple language, etc. What is the place for study in depth? For theology, not only for experts, but for the whole church? One writer suggested that Christianity grew because it "outthought" people in the ancient world. What about the tension between being people of deeds and people who nurture the mind?**
- f. Verse 14 indicates that the exercise of the mind is necessary for distinguishing good and evil.
- g. What programs do we have now that encourage rigorous exercise of the mind?

In 6:1-8 the author turns from shaming his listeners to exhorting (6:1-3) and warning them (6:4-8).

- a. In 6:1-3, he encourages them to move beyond the foundational teachings. One assumes that the abcs are mentioned in v. 2.

- b. In 6:4-6, the author uses one of three stern warnings that are found in the book (cf. 10:26-31; 12:16-17) that suggest the irrevocability of abandoning the faith.
- i. Verses 4-5 list the once-for-all experiences that the listeners have had in Christ. These experiences (reception of Holy Spirit, tasting the powers of the coming age, etc) are precious beyond imagining.
 - ii. V. 6 indicates the possibility that these people will "fall away" (cf. "drift away" in 2:1): it is impossible to renew them to repentance. [Note the author's fondness for the word "impossible" in 6:18; 10:4; 11:6.] He does not say why such renewal is impossible. Note the following.
 - (1) The author is speaking to those who have not yet left; he is not dealing with a situation when someone wants to come back after abandoning the faith. The passage may be largely for rhetorical effect; that is, he may be saying, "Salvation is such a one-time gift that you cannot trivialize it by thinking you can leave and then start over again. Christ died but once. Your repentance is but once. Think twice before you leave!"
 - (2) In the second century, some churches split when people who committed apostasy during persecution tried to return to the church. Some quoted Hebrews 6:4-6 and refused to let them return. Others wanted to let them return.
 - iii. Verses 7 and 8 illustrate the stern teaching with an illustration from agriculture. Land that produces vegetation receives a blessing; but if it produces only thorns, it is to be burned. The community faces a decision: Will the people remain faithful or not? The consequences are severe.
- c. In 6:9-12 the author turns from warning to positive encouragement.
- i. One means of encouragement is to remind people what they have already invested in their Christian life. Here the author reminds the people of their good works of an earlier time (v. 10).
 - ii. Verse 11 builds on the past to urge the listeners to continue what they have done already.
 - iii. Verse 12 motivates the listeners by asking them to imitate those who inherited the promise. Not only does he recall their own past efforts; he describes heroes of the past who did not give up.
 - iv. **Discussion: Reflect on the role of memory to encourage us to continue to sacrifice and maintain our Christian commitments. What memories do we have that stimulate us for the future? What memories in this congregation? The author mentions imitating people of the past? Mention some who serve as a source of encouragement for you.**

5. In the unit for today, we have seen that the author encourages the listeners by a) shaming them (5:11-14); b) warning them (6:1-8); and by c) appealing to good memories of past actions as a motivation to remain faithful. Discuss the appropriateness and effectiveness of these motivations.

WEEK NINE: THE CERTAINTY OF THE PROMISE (6:13-7:28)

1. The preceding section was a long exhortation in which the author used several motivations to encourage this house church not to give up. One of the motivations was to imitate those who "through faith and patience" inherited the promise. The reference to "faith and patience" reflects our impatience with God's timetable. Impatience is a characteristic of our own generation, which expects immediate results and is often unprepared for long dry spells. [This could be a matter for discussion.] Note that the author used negative examples of those who lacked faith in 3:7-4:11 [esp. 4:2]. Now he calls for Christians to find positive examples.

2. The specific positive example that the author has in mind is Abraham (6:13-20), the great model of faithfulness.
 - a. Verses 13-14 recall God's promise. The promise he mentions (Gen. 22:17) was given after the sacrifice of Isaac. God *swore* (the equivalent of promise; the OT doesn't use the word *promise*).
 - b. Verse 15 refers to Abraham's "waiting patiently." [Note: if you follow the story of Abraham, he doesn't seem to be so patient in many cases.] "Waiting patiently" is the response of people who go on believing when they see no results. This is the situation of the listeners—and also our situation. We don't want to wait patiently!
 - c. Verses 16-17 focus on the fact that God swore; i.e., he took an oath. The oath gives special validity to a promise. God is *reliable*, as Abraham discovered.
 - d. In verse 18, the author no longer is talking about Abraham, but about *us*—his listeners who have come to doubt God's reliability.
 - i. In the words "we who have fled" he describes Christians as refugees who now have a hope to grab. ii. According to v. 19, this hope is an anchor of the soul going behind the curtain. Note the mixed metaphors: an anchor going behind the curtain!
 - (1) The anchor was a nautical metaphor suggesting security so that one will not drift. Note our hymn, "We have an anchor."
 - (2) The "curtain" is a reference to Jesus' entry behind the curtain into the sanctuary in heaven. Our hope is based on Jesus' enthronement in heaven, as the first four chapters have indicated.
 - (3) Once more, the author refers to Melchizedek (v. 20). Jesus is our "forerunner"; that is, he opened the way into the presence of God that had previously been inaccessible for us.
 - e. Note what is said in verses 13-20: We can be like Abraham, waiting patiently when we see no results, because God has made a guarantee to us also: Jesus' enthronement into God's presence is God's oath to us. This is what keeps us going!
 - f. **Discussion: We might discuss the challenges to believing the promises. Some offer a religion that claims constant rewards and assurances of God's presence. It was not that way for Abraham or for the recipients of Hebrews.**

Nor for many of us. What keeps us going? A promise that we have never seen realized! That's not easy. We believe that Jesus triumphed even if we cannot see it.

3. Hebrews 7 appears to stand on its own as a commentary on the two passages in the OT that mentioned Melchizedek. However, it actually continues the thought that began in 6:13-20. The author has shown that Christians have an anchor that keeps them from drifting away (6:19): the fact that Christ has become the high priest after the order of Melchizedek (6:20). Note once more that Hebrews makes sense only when we note the connection between exhortation and theology. 6:13-20 is exhortation, while chapter 7 is commentary that supports the exhortation.
4. Two passages in the OT mention Melchizedek. One may refer to the story in Gen. 14:17-20 and Psalm 110:4. The fact that Melchizedek is mentioned in this mysterious way invited much speculation in Jewish literature. One of the documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls is about Melchizedek. In Jewish literature, he became the ideal priest-king. This is the background of Hebrews 7. If Melchizedek is the ideal priest-king, then a) he is greater than the priesthood of Aaron and b) Christ must belong to this kind of priesthood. Note the class should not spend needless time speculating about Melchizedek as a person because we don't know much. Hebrews treats him as the ideal type.
5. In 7:1-3 the author treat Melchizedek as the ideal type. His name in Hebrew means "king of righteousness." "Salem" means "shalom" = peace. "Without mother, without father, etc." means simply that they aren't mentioned in the OT. However, this language was also used for ancient deities. Thus Melchizedek is the ideal priest.
6. In the remainder of the commentary, the author reflects on this ideal "order" of priesthood, basing his comments on Psalm 110:4 ("you are a priest forever"). Special emphasis is on his permanence.
 - a. In verses 4-10 he is better than Aaron's priesthood because they are "dying men," while he "lives" (v. 8).
 - b. In verses 11-19 the emphasis is on the fact that Melchizedek, unlike Aaron, has an indestructible life (v. 16).
 - c. In verses 20-22, Melchizedek is better because his priesthood was accompanied by an oath that he is "forever."
 - d. In verses 23-28, the emphasis is on the fact that this order of priesthood "abides" forever (v. 24).
7. Just as Christ was better than the angels in ch. 1 because only he abides forever, he is better than the priesthood of Aaron because this order of priesthood abides forever.
8. All of this presentation about Melchizedek is intended to demonstrate that Christians have something permanent and stable—an anchor to which they can hold.

9. Discuss the challenge of emphasizing this feature of eternity as an encouragement to build one's life on something permanent. What impermanent alternatives tempt us away from the faith?

WEEK TEN: WHY GO TO CHURCH? (8:1-10:25)

1. For most people, Hebrews 8:1-10:18 is the most difficult section of the sermon. The argument about the priesthood, the furniture in the tabernacle, and the types of sacrifices is not easy to follow. Once more note that this section is followed by 10:19-25, an exhortation that ends with the summons not to abandon the assembly. Thus theology and exhortation are linked. The entire section is providing the reasons for going to church!
Discussion: What reasons do you give for going to church?

2. The argument begins in chapter 8, which focuses first on the greater tabernacle (8:1-6).
 - a. Remember that Hebrews is a series of comparisons. Chapter 7 described a better order of priesthood, based on the fact that this priesthood is heavenly and eternal. Here the author recalls that Moses built the tabernacle according to the divine pattern (8:5; Exod. 25:40). This passage implies that the earthly tabernacle was a mere copy of the heavenly original. Because Christ is at God's right hand (8:1), he now serves in the heavenly archetype. [Note that Hebrews never refers to the temple; the author always refers to the tabernacle/tent in the wilderness. This is in keeping with the emphasis on the people who have not yet reached the promised land.] Note also that the imagery of the "copy" and "shadow" sounds like Plato's distinction between the "shadow" (earthly things) and the "reality" (heavenly things).
 - b. Priestly service in a greater tent suggests a greater ministry (v. 6) and a greater mediator of the covenant.
 - c. Mention of the covenant (v. 6) leads to the longest Scripture citation in Hebrews (8:8-13), a citation of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jeremiah spoke of a "new covenant." NT writers often refer to Jeremiah's prophecy (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6). For the author of Hebrews, this new covenant is connected with the sacrifices in the tabernacle. The phrase in the citation that the author will develop is in 8:12, "I will remember their sins no more." Chapter 9 will develop this theme.
 - d. In 8:13 the author appeals once more to the distinction between the permanent and the transitory; implication is that Christians have a permanent covenant.

3. Chapter 9 continues the discussion of the taking away of sins in order to show that Jesus is "better." Here the author turns from the superior tabernacle to the superior sacrifice for sins. All of chapter 9 is based primarily on the description of the day of atonement (yom kippur) in Leviticus 16.
 - a. In 9:1-10 the author begins with a description of the tabernacle furniture, emphasizing the distinction between the holy place and the most holy place. On OT passages that list the furniture, see Ex 25:23-30; 30:6-8; 37:17-24. The author's listing doesn't conform exactly to the OT references, especially as regards the altar of incense. In contrast to Jewish sources, the author emphasizes the limited value of the sacrifices. The "way was not yet opened" (v. 8). Sacrifices only dealt with external matters (v. 10). Note: The OT passages all assume that sacrifices were indeed effective in atoning for sin.

- b. Verses 1-10 set the stage for the description of the perfect sacrifice (9:11-14) that overcomes the defects of the sacrificial system.
 - i. The sacrifice of Christ was offered in a "better tent" (9:11), the heavenly sanctuary described in ch. 8.
 - ii. Christ sacrificed his own blood rather than the blood of animals (9:12).
 - iii. The sacrifice of Christ cleansed the conscience, the inner part of human existence (9:13) rather than the flesh (cf. 9:10).
 - c. Verses 15-22 focus on the death of Jesus as "covenant" or "testament." Just as death and the shedding of blood were necessary for the old covenant to be in effect, the death of Jesus puts into effect a new covenant.
 - d. The focus of 9:23-28 is on the fact that the sacrifice of Christ was not an annual event, as in the Day of atonement, but a once-for-all event.
4. In 10:1-18 the author offers the summation of why the sacrifice of Christ was superior.
- a. In 10:1-10, the author contrasts sacrifices that had to be repeated with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. He uses the quotation of Ps. 40:7-9 (Heb. 10:5-8) to remind the listeners that sacrifices were not efficacious in and of themselves. The author concludes that the repetition of ancient sacrifices was evidence that they never completed the task of taking away sin. [Note: All OT witnesses assumed that sacrifices done in the right spirit were real means of atonement. Only in light of the cross can the author conclude that, if Jesus' death takes away sins, earlier sacrifices were not effective. In Churches of Christ many have used this passage to suggest that sins were "rolled forward." No passage ever suggests this concept.
 - b. In 10:11-18 the author focuses again on the permanence of the sacrifice of Christ.
5. The entire argument has been aiming toward the exhortation in 10:19-25. Why the elaborate description of the work of Christ? To give the foundation for the Christian response.
- a. V. 19-21 recapitulate the argument of 8:1-10:18. Because Christ has entered the heavenly sanctuary, we have the "confidence" to follow him.
 - b. The three "let us" phrases in verses 22-24 draw out the implications of the work of Christ. What "we have" as a gift is the basis for the imperatives.
 - i. "Let us draw near" (10:22) indicates that we can come before God because our high priest has opened the way.
 - ii. "Let us hold fast. . . unwaveringly" (10:23) again indicates that Christians have something stable to which they can cling.
 - iii. "Let us stir one another up to love and good works": The work of Christ stirs us up to look out for each other.
 - iv. The assembly provides the opportunity for us to encourage one another by reminding us of the greatness of the work of Christ. [Note: "encouraging one another" is not simply patting one another on the back; encouragement takes place when we retell the story.] [Note also: This is not about "missing church" as much as it is about the discouragement that leads

people to *abandon* the assembly.

6. Discussion: The temptation in our study of Hebrews is to become focused on minor details rather than see the argument as a whole. What can we learn from the author's approach toward getting people to return to church? Why didn't he just tell them to return to the assembly without giving this extended argument?

WEEK ELEVEN: HEROES OF FAITH (HEB. 10:26-11:40)

After arguing through numerous comparisons that Christ is "better" and that this salvation makes it worthwhile to remain a Christian, the author of Hebrews begins the last major section of the sermon in 10:26. In the last section, there is more exhortation and less dense argumentation as he appeals to the listeners to remain firm. The centerpiece of this last section is chapter 11, which is one of the most memorable parts of Hebrews. This list of the heroes of faith is intended to provide examples of believers who remained faithful despite obstacles.

1. The author begins this section with a warning (10:26-31), the second of the three warnings about the irrevocability of apostasy (cf. 6:4-6; 12:16-17). Note also 2:1-4, which carries the same theme.
 - a. The "deliberate sin" refers to the abandonment of one's faith, including the abandonment of the assemblies mentioned in 10:25. The Bible frequently distinguishes between sins of ignorance and deliberate sins. Cf. especially Num 15:27-31. Note "unintentional" sins in Lev 4:1-2, 13, 22, 27; 5:14-15LXX). This must be placed in the context of other passages in Hebrews that indicate the temptations facing the readers: 2:3; 3:12; cf. 12:15; 6:5; 4:1.
 - b. The motif of the greater the salvation, the greater the consequences for rejecting it was first stated in 2:1-4.
 - c. After the grand description of the great sacrifice for sins (8:1-10:18), the logical conclusion is that to reject it is to "spurn the Son of God" and to "profane the blood of the covenant."
 - d. The description of God's judgment in 10:30-31 indicates that God's awesome goodness is accompanied by God's judgment for those who reject his grace.
 - e. **Discussion: Reflect on the theme "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" as a motivation. The author insists that one cannot have the grace of God without God's judgment; that God is not our "buddy."**
Comment on C. S. Lewis's statement that most of us want, not a father in heaven, but a grandfather in heaven who indulges us. What has happened to the theme of the judgment of God?

2. In 10:32-39 the author prepares the way for the great chapter on faith by giving positive motivation to struggling Christians.
 - a. In 10:32-34, the author recalls "former days" as a motivation. They accepted confiscation of their property, social marginalization, etc. because they knew what was real: the greater and abiding possession. They could handle persecution better than boredom! Time has elapsed, and this enthusiasm is gone. **Discussion: We saw earlier the appeal to memory (6:9-12) as a motivation. We might discuss memories of times when the church demonstrated sacrificial commitment and intensity as a basis for motivating us now.**
 - b. In 10:35-39 the author moves from memory to exhortation, challenging the readers to persevere/endure. He indicates that their primary problem is the need for

perseverance, which he equates with faith (10:38-39). Note: the Greek makes no distinction between "faith" and "faithfulness." Faith is not just believing something is true; it becomes evident in our capacity to persevere in times of difficulty.

Chapter 11 illustrates what the author says in 10:32-39. The alternative to turning away is to find good examples of perseverance and faithfulness. Note the bad example in 3:7-4:11 and the author's call for good examples in 6:11-12.

- a. A common literary form in Jewish literature was to exhort people by using lists of heroes who exemplified a particular quality. The author is using a well-known literary form. Note that, with the exception of Abraham, the OT says nothing about the faith of these heroes. The author organizes the retelling of the OT story around this theme.
 - b. The author begins with a definition (not the only definition) of faith that will guide the discussion. Faith means "seeing things" (i.e., the invisible). Note how this theme continues throughout the chapter. People believe despite the fact that they have nothing tangible or visible to reassure them.
 - c. In 11:4-7 the author describes people prior to Abraham. Note that Noah built the ark when he believed in things he couldn't see, and as a result he was marginalized from the world (11:7, he "condemned the world"). This is parallel to the experiences of the listeners.
 - d. In 11:8-22 a major part of the discussion treats Abraham and his more immediate descendants.
 - i. Note the emphasis on Abraham's insecure and marginalized existence: he didn't know where he was going; he was an alien (v. 9) without a secure home.
 - ii. Note Abraham's frustration: They died in faith without receiving the promise (v. 13).
 - iii. Note all of the words for the "unseen reality" that guided Abraham: the reward, the city, the inheritance.
 - iv. The emphasis on Abraham's marginalization probably parallels the experience of the listeners. Faith isn't easy when you can't guarantee the promises!
 - e. In 11:23-31 the author describes Moses and his immediate successors, making the same emphasis as with Abraham.
 - i. Moses was marginalized; he suffered (11:25-26).
 - ii. Moses "saw the invisible" (11:27).
 - f. The list in 11:32-38 focuses on the marginalization of heroes from the world around them (note 11:38, "of whom the world wasn't worthy"). Again, a parallel to the listeners.
 - g. Note the conclusion in 11:39-40: the author turns from the past to the readers:
 - h. they are counting on you.
- Discussion: We might list our own heroes who persevered when they saw few results; heroes who did not look out for something other than themselves;**

heroes who paid a price, believing in a cause that was more than anything tangible.

WEEK TWELVE: A HEAVENLY WORSHD? SERVICE (HEB. 12:1-29)

1. Remember the question that Hebrews is answering: Is it worth it to remain a Christian? The author's listeners are asking that question. In a series of comparisons the author has pointed to the greatness of Christ in order to motivate the listeners not to give up their extraordinary possession.
2. In the previous lesson (10:26-11:40), the author called on the listeners to persevere in the midst of hardship (10:36-39), equating perseverance with faith(fulness). Chapter 11 lists heroes of faithfulness who persevered without seeing the fulfillment of the promises (cf. 11:13, 39). In chapter 12 the author continues to offer reasons for perseverance.
3. One can see that 12:1-11 continues the theme of chapter 11 of heroes of the faith.
 - a. According to 12:1-3, Jesus is the ultimate hero of faith. The author envisions a sports arena with a great cloud of witnesses (the heroes of ch. 11). The listeners are involved in a race. The theme of endurance continues in the phrase, "let us run with perseverance." The race is a marathon and not a sprint! We see here that the listeners are like distance runners facing exhaustion. Jesus is the ultimate hero who "endured the cross" and "endured opposition" ["endure" is the same word as "persevere" in Greek]. Jesus is the great example of perseverance! As in 2:10, the listeners are invited to *see* or *look at* Jesus. They cannot see the invisible world (11:1), but they see Jesus. As in 2:10 and 6:20, Jesus is the forerunner (NIV "author") who goes ahead and opens the way. Jesus' path led to the right hand of God, but his victory came only through a cross. No cross, no crown. **Discussion might address the readers' lack of preparation for the "long haul"—and our own.**
 - b. The theme of perseverance continues in 12:4-11. We note that the listeners have not died for their faith (12:4), but they are suffering. The author quotes Prov. 3:11, which he applies to the church. Suffering is no shame; it is the discipline of a loving father. Again this is a call to persevere (cf. 12:7) present circumstances when they see no victories.
4. In 12:12-17 the author continues to urge the church members to persevere.
 - a. Verses 12-13 envision a people on a long trek through the wilderness. "Drooping hands and weak knees" suggests that the people are exhausted. On this journey they need to "make straight paths" so that the lame may not be left behind. That is, it is not an individual trek, but one that involves the entire community.
 - b. According to v. 14, the entire community is expected to make peace with all.
 - c. Verses 15-17 point to community responsibility to see that all complete the journey. Note the repetition of "no one." That is, they have responsibility for the entire community—even those with special needs.
 - d. The story of Esau is the opposite of the heroes of ch. 11. He is pictured as sexually immoral (not mentioned in the OT) and one who preferred the here and now over

the reward. The listeners are expected to look out for each other. e. **Discussion: Reflect on the corporate nature of the journey in comparison to contemporary focus on religion as a private matter. Reflect on the challenge of looking out for the spiritual health of others in the setting of the large urban church. We can only persevere if we persevere together!**

5. The rhetorical high point and crescendo of Hebrews is 12:18-29. It is poetic like 1:1-4, and it restates the reasons for remaining faithful with a new comparison. This time the comparison is between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Notice the careful parallelism between the description of the two mountains.
 - a. In Jewish tradition, nothing was as awesome as God's appearance at Mount Sinai. The natural phenomena described indicate what an awesome moment this was (cf. Exod. 19:16-19; Deut. 4:1 Iff). Jewish literature looked back to this as the defining moment of Israel's experience. It was the ultimate worship service!
 - b. The comparison/contrast in 12:18-24 indicate that Christians have come to something more awesome! Note the parallelism, "you have not come to . . ." and "you have come to. . ." Mount Zion is more awesome than even Mount Sinai. "You have come" probably refers to the Christians who have assembled together. Nothing in their assembly looks very impressive or awesome to the human eye—certainly not as awesome as Mount Sinai! The author claims that Christian experience is even more awesome (even if they are meeting in little house churches). According to v. 18, Mount Sinai was only tangible—something that can be touched. All of the natural phenomena are simply phenomena of this world. On the other hand, Mount Zion belongs to the heavenly world (like the work of Christ). The church is actually meeting with the angels, with those who have gone before, etc.), even when they don't feel or see it.
 - c. **Discussion: Note that this great experience doesn't depend on whether the people "feel" it or not. This awesome event doesn't depend on our capacity to make something happen! In every place where God's people meet, something is happening. What does all of this tell us about our discussions of worship?.**
 - d. Why remain Christian? Our participation in the heavenly world is something too good to throw away.

6. In verses 25-29 the author once more warns the people ("Our God is a consuming fire"). The tangible world will pass away, but we belong to an unshakeable kingdom. Consequently, we want to remain faithful.

WEEK THHtTEEN: GOING OUTSDDE THE CAMP (CH. 13)

1. We have seen that the end of chapter 12 is the rhetorical climax of Hebrews, a comparison between the new and the old in order to remind discouraged Christians about the extraordinary possession that they have. Chapter 13 concludes the sermon with the final exhortation. We note that, except for 13:9-14, this chapter has a style that is different from the rest of the sermon and more like the conclusion in the letters of Paul. Thus some have said that Hebrews 1-12 is a sermon followed by an epistolary ending in chapter 13.
2. Verses 1-6 are especially unlike the rest of Hebrews and similar to the exhortations in Paul's letters. Here is the only instance where Hebrews gives specific instructions for ethical conduct. These instructions are commonplace in Paul's writings. They describe the habits that characterize this community that has left its own family relationships to become a new family.
 - a. "Brotherly love" (*Philadelphia*) (13:1) had a special meaning in the early church. Among ancient people the word was used exclusively for one's physical brothers or relatives. For early Christians, the new family in the house church assumed the traditional roles of the family; this included taking care of each other (cf. Rom. 12:10; IThess. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22).
 - b. Hospitality (13:2) was especially important in the house church. See Rom 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9. In a world where inns were notorious for vice, Christian travelers could enter a city and find hospitality. The word *philoxenia* means literally "friendship with strangers." Guests in homes were literally strangers from other towns.
 - c. Christians care for their own in the prisons (13:3; cf. 10:34).
 - d. Christians were united with the same attitude toward marriage (13:4). Compare Paul's instructions in 1 Thess. 4:1-8.
 - e. The author cautions against the love of money (cf. 1 Tim. 3:3 on the qualifications for elders). Cf. 1 Tim. 6:10.
 - f. **Discussion: Several items for discussion can come from this list. Note the cohesion that is expected of the whole community that is united by its shared values. Christians are united as a family. These look like instructions for new Christians that provide instructions on expectations. Which instructions do we commonly give? What role does the caution against love of money play in our ethical instructions?**
3. In 13:7-8 the author mentions leaders for the first time. Previous instructions have focused on the mutual participation of the whole church in encouraging (3:12), stirring one another up (10:23), and in teaching (5:11-14). Here he mentions leaders who have died. Just as the author has instructed the community to imitate past heroes, here he advises them to imitate the leaders whom they have known.
4. In 13:9-15 the author's exhortation returns to the style of the first three chapters, for he

connects what "we have" (13:10, 14) with the exhortation "let us" (13:13,15). What "we have" in Christ is the motivation for the Christian response ("let us").

- a. V. 9 has the only reference in the book to false teachings. Since the author refers to "all kinds," he probably does not have any particular false teaching in mind.
- b. The affirmation that "we have an altar" (13:10) is similar to previous claims that "we have a great high priest" (8:1, 10:19). This sums up the message of the book.
 - i. In 13:11 -12, the author returns to the Day of Atonement ceremony (cf. Heb. 9) once more to illustrate the "altar" that we have. In a final comparison, the author shows how Jesus' suffered "outside the camp" in the same way that the bodies of sacrificial animals were taken outside the camp.
 - ii. As in the first 12 chapters, Christ's sacrifice is the basis for the exhortation, "let us go outside the camp, bearing his shame." Throughout Hebrews, the author has challenged the community to follow the path of Jesus the forerunner. "Outside the camp" is a place of shame. Here it probably refers to the marginalization that the listeners experience. They were probably wondering if it was worth it to be marginalized in society. The author reminds them that Jesus was the marginalized one. The place of the church is to share his shame.
 - iii. **Discussion: This is a good place for reflection on the church's current status in society. Will devout Christians always be alienated from their society? Is America a Christian society? If so, Christians might not be marginalized. In what ways do we find our values ridiculed?**
 - iv. V. 14 offers an additional motivation: We are marginalized because we belong to another city (just like Abraham in 11:13-16).
 - v. Verses 15-16 are an appropriate ending to a sermon that has discussed sacrifices in the tabernacle. Here the author describes a sacrifice of praise and good works.
- c. While v. 7 had referred to leaders who have died, v. 17 refers to leaders who are still living. Although the community practices mutual encouragement, they still need leaders who care for them.
- d. The remainder of the book (vss. 18-25) resemble the ending of Paul's letters. Note a rare personal reference from the author in vss. 18-19.