

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLE LESSONS HEBREWS, JAMES



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Cover: Designed by Daniel Webster – Photo is magnification of Acts 17:11

Bible Quotations:

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RADIO SERIES

DEVELOPED BY: DANIEL WEBSTER (2010)

Torah scroll - on sheepskin dating from 1155-1225



Courtesy of Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

KEY VERSE:

THESE WERE MORE NOBLE THAN THOSE IN THESSALONICA, IN THAT THEY RECEIVED THE WORD WITH ALL READINESS OF MIND, AND

SEARCHED THE SCRIPTURES

DAILY, WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO.

ACTS 17:11

THEME:

AND YOU WILL SEEK ME AND FIND ME,
WHEN YOU SEARCH FOR ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.

JEREMIAH 29:13

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Preface

The lessons from Matthew to Revelation have been prepared through personal study of the New Testament. As an on-going part of our radio ministry in Ghana, it was decided to broadcast a series of teachings that would provide one lesson for each of the two hundred and sixty chapters of the New Testament. This work was completed over a five-year period from 2010 to 2015. These lessons are not intended as a commentary, or as an in-depth exegesis of each chapter. The lessons were written to be a concise, and consecutive teaching of the chapters of the New Testament, while providing practical instructions in Christian living. There is a strong emphasis in these lessons on the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The author's intent is not simply to help people learn the teachings of the New Testament, but more importantly, he desires that all would come to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. Each lesson contains a section entitled "Today's Bible Question". This section is designed to address a relevant question, pertaining to the chapter lesson, or with a view to the present spiritual climate. The lessons will serve many purposes for those interested in the teachings of the New Testament. I envision this work helping various bible teachers, Sunday school teachers, or youth leaders who wish to use a consecutive approach to presenting the scriptures to those whom they teach. Each lesson has been kept to a standard of two typed pages, or between 1500 to 2000 words. This will allow the lessons to be easily adapted into a regular teaching schedule. Each lesson, including the bible question section, can be read in less than 15 minutes, leaving time for group discussions, or further commenting, during a 30 to 45 minute bible teaching class.

It is my hope that this work will serve many in the Christian community with a greater appreciation of the teachings of the New Testament, and also be used by God to bring people to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

This work is dedicated to the glory of God, and the expansion of His kingdom both now and forevermore.

Daniel Webster
Oct. 2015

LESSONS IN HEBREWS

Hebrews praying at wailing wall (Jerusalem) – *'Living in the shadows of the past'*



Image courtesy of Daniel Webster

“FOR THE LAW, HAVING A SHADOW OF THE GOOD THINGS TO COME, AND NOT THE VERY IMAGE OF THE THINGS, CAN NEVER WITH THESE SAME SACRIFICES, WHICH THEY OFFER CONTINUALLY YEAR BY YEAR, MAKE THOSE WHO APPROACH PERFECT.”

HEBREWS 10:1

The Radiance of His glory

HEBREWS I

In our last lesson we were thinking about the letter to Philemon, and Paul's appeal for Onesimus, a run-away slave, to be received in Christian love by his master Philemon. Today we begin a study of the book of Hebrews. Hebrews was written to Jews who had professed to be Christians, but were in danger of falling away from their Christian profession to return to the practices of Judaism. The author will go through a lengthy argument to prove why the Christian has so much more in Christ, than the Jew ever had under the Old Covenant. He also warns of the dangers of Apostasy, and it's consequences for those who depart from their Christian profession.

In Chapter one the writer will demonstrate the superior nature of Jesus Christ as God, and worthy of more honor than the angels. He will do this by quoting from several passages in the Old Testament which refer to the honor God has given to His Son, above all others, and which reveals his divinity. Hebrews chapter 1 provides us with powerful proofs that Jesus Christ is none other than the eternal God, and our creator.

The first three verses of Hebrews are a magnificent portrait of the person and worth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is the message and messenger through whom God has spoken in the present age, having used prophets in former times. Jesus was also called the heir of all things, meaning He will inherit God's eternal kingdom, and rule over God's people forever. He is the one who made the worlds, and this is an unmistakable declaration of Him being both God and creator. We also read here that He is the brightness of His glory, and the express image of his person. The wording here conveys the idea of an exact representation, the same in essence and majesty. The author is trying to be very emphatic, and clear in His statements, to reveal the identity of Jesus as equal with God. Just so there is no misunderstanding of the one to whom the writer is speaking he also identifies him as the one who upholds all things by the word of His power, and no one else but God could have such power. He is the same one who purged our sins and then sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high. We know it was Jesus who died on the cross to purge our sins, and therefore the conclusion is certain that Jesus Christ is none other than the eternal Son of God, co-equal with God the Father.

The remainder of the chapter seeks to prove that Jesus is more excellent than the angels, using scripture to support this argument. The first reference is from Psalm 2:7 where the Messiah is called God's Son, and also refers to His resurrection as the day he was begotten. Though some might contend this is not the meaning, Act 13:33 will confirm that the reference in Psalm 2 is a reference to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Also there is a reference to 2Samuel 7:14 to emphasize the point that Jesus is God's Son. The next scripture quotation is from Psalm 97:7 which is not a direct quotation, but the meaning is the same, and that is that all the angels are called upon to worship the Messiah. If all angels worship Him, the implication is that He is not only greater than the angels, but He is also God, since no one but God is to be worshipped. Angels understand this, for we hear an angel refusing worship in Rev 22:9, and calling on John to worship God alone. Yet another quotation is taken from Psalm 45:6,7, and this time it is direct quotation, where God the Father addresses God the Son, and speaks of his righteous and eternal reign. Another proof of Jesus greatness and deity is from Psalm 102:25-28, which is very close to a direct quotation, and speaks of His power as the creator, and sustainer of creation. Finally the author quotes from Psalm 110:1, where the Messiah is called David's Lord, and yet he is also David's son. Jesus used this same text to challenge the Pharisees who were trying to trip Him up in His words. This text is another proof of the divinity of Jesus the Messiah, and proof of his greatness above all the angels. So Hebrews chapter 1 is a collection of proof text from the Old Testament to reveal the greatness of who Jesus really is. This should teach us the importance of the Old Testament, as that which has important doctrinal revelations for us to learn. In fact there are 99 quotations from Old Testament in this small book of Hebrews. Having a good grasp and appreciation of the Old Testament is essential for any serious Christian, who wants to learn the New Testament, and how to live for Christ. In the final verse of chapter one the angels are referred to as ministering spirits sent to minister to those who are heirs of salvation. This also might have reference to Psalm 103:21 where angels are called ministers who do God's pleasure. It is amazing to think that the angels of heaven, who are greater in strength and wisdom than people, are designated to serve the spiritual needs of the children of God. God has such a love and interest in we, mere mortals upon the earth, that he assigns the care and watchful eyes of angels to guard over us, protect us, and serve our needs in this world. We are not greater than angels, but God is pleased to use these exalted beings, to serve us. This ought to humble us, and make us worship our God, who so favors us, and cares for us.

Chapter one of Hebrews is a remarkable look at the Old Testament proofs of Jesus as the exalted Son of God, excelling in honor above all angels. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the way in which God speaks to us today, and the one through whom the worlds were made. He is the brightness of God's glory, and the one who purged our sins and sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high. All honor and glory belong to our Lord Jesus Christ, as our creator, and our Savior. We are grateful for the angels that God directs for our care and protection. They are the servants of our Lord, and it is our Lord Jesus who excels above all the angels. This was important for the Jewish Christians to hear and understand, so that they would not have misplaced priorities about whom they should honor. From their own scriptures it could be clearly shown that their Messiah would be greater than all the angels. Only Christ would

have the means to offer us eternal salvation. If you want Jesus to be your Savior, and have him purge away all of your sin, then you must place your trust in Him. That is why he came into this world, and He is calling on you to believe in Him for the salvation of your soul. Why not pray right now and ask Him to save you.

"who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high." Hebrews 1:3

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we introduced the book of Hebrews, and learned that Jesus Christ is far superior to all of the angels, as demonstrated through many old testament quotations. We also learned that Jesus is none other than the eternal and almighty God. Someone might ask the question, "What is the role of angels?"

Angels are discussed in Hebrews chapter one, as a comparison to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to demonstrate, that while angels have some importance, they are not as great, or worthy of as much honor, as our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is divine, and all the angels are called to worship Him. But then what is the role of the angels? Not only do we learn from Hebrews one the role of the angels for us, but we can also learn from other passages in the bible how these heavenly beings occupy their time.

Here in Hebrews 1 the angels are called ministers, which means servants. They serve those who are heirs of salvation. This means that angels are helping the church in various ways. We can't see them at work, but we know that they watch carefully what happens in the church. We read in Ephesians 3:10 that the wisdom of God is displayed in the church, and this for the benefit of principalities and powers. The angels have various ranks in heaven, some greater and some lesser in honor, but they all learn of God's wisdom through the church. This is seen in how the church demonstrates the unity of the spirit, obedience to Christ, and transformed lives for God's service. At this they marvel and also worship and praise God.

Another important function of angels is to protect us from harm. Our Lord said that angels watch over us, particular in the case of children (Matt 18:10). This is in the context of anyone who would seek to harm a child. It is comforting to realize that God has sent his angels to watch over children, and perhaps all people to ensure that no evil befalls us; or at least nothing can happen to us unless God allows it for some higher purpose.

We know that angels are frequently sent from heaven to earth to convey a message to men. We see this when Abraham met angels before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and they warned of the impending judgment. Also Daniel met the angel named Gabriel who came to speak to him, and help him to understand the vision Daniel was given. This same angel was sent to announce the birth of the Messiah to Mary. Other angels also gathered in great numbers to help announce the birth of Christ to some shepherds near Bethlehem. There are more than 100 references to angels in the Old Testament, and 165 references in the New Testament. So the bible has much to say about these heavenly spirits, and the roles they play in our lives.

We also know that angels are occupied with worship and praise in the presence of God. This is evident from passages such as Isaiah 6, where we hear angels declaring "Holy, Holy, Holy" in the presence of God continually. We also see something similar in the book of Revelation chapter 4 and 5 when angels fall down before the throne of God, and declare "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty".

As messengers of God, sometimes they give instructions and guidance, such as is the case with Joseph when he was warned by an angel in his dream to flee to Egypt to protect the baby Jesus from Herod. Also Philip in Acts 8 was guided by an angel to go quickly and meet up with a chariot to share the gospel with a searching soul. Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 was spoken to by an angel to send for Peter in Joppa.

Sometimes angels make provisions for his servants who need food or strengthening. Elijah was ministered to by an angel who provided him with food; and our Lord Jesus was ministered to in the garden of gethsemane by angels when he was in need of strengthening after sorrowful prayer.

Angels have often come to the rescue of God's people, as we see in the Old Testament battles that were fought by the Lord's angel. Hezekiah king of Israel was delivered from the armies of Assyria when an angel fought for Israel, and slew their enemies on the battlefield. Also when the apostles were imprisoned in Acts chapter 5, it was an angel that came to release them from the prison.

Angels are also associated with caring for believers at the time of their death. We learn from the Lord in Luke 16 about how angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom immediately following his death.

Angels are also associated with God's judgment on the wicked, for in many instances in the bible we find angels being used by God to execute judgment, such as at Sodom and Gomorrah, and the slaying of the firstborn of Egypt as the last of 10 plagues which brought judgments against Pharaoh and the land of Egypt.

"take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my father who is in heaven." Matt 18:10

LESSON 206
So Great a Salvation
HEBREWS 2

In our last lesson we began a study of the book of Hebrews, and considered the proofs that Jesus is greater than the angels from various old testament quotations. The book of Hebrews is an on-going argument to prove that what Christians have through faith in Christ, is superior to anything that Jews had under the Mosaic Law. In chapter 2 we learn about the great salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ, and why we should not neglect this salvation.

The Hebrews were professing Christians, but in danger of letting slip those things they had heard. They did this by withdrawing themselves from Christian fellowship, seeking to return to the practices of Judaism, not maturing through attention to God's word, perhaps even through the willful sin of unbelief, or a lack of faith which caused them to withdraw from persecution. The Hebrews are warned not to draw back from faith in Christ, or neglect God's great salvation. This salvation is called 'great' because it is God's revelation of the remedy for man's rebellion and sin. It is also given to us through Jesus Christ, and not through angels, like the Old Testament law. It also cost the greatest price of all, when the Son of God was made a sacrifice for us on the cross. It secures for us the greatest blessing by offering forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and adoption into God's family. It is also great salvation because of its' scope – reaching to all of humanity, offering freely salvation to whoever will receive it.

We are warned not to neglect this great salvation in order to escape from God's judgment. If we do not wish to be cast out of God's presence into the blackness of darkness, and the flames in the lake of fire, then we must be very careful not to treat God's salvation lightly. Make sure you are not neglecting His great salvation.

The great salvation was revealed to us through the apostles, and confirmed by the signs, miracles and wonders which they performed. This teaches us that signs, miracles and wonders were used by God to authenticate His word spoken through the apostles. Once the apostle had delivered to us the full revelation of the New Testament, the signs, miracles and wonders would no longer be required, since the word of God had been delivered to the church in a written and lasting form in the bible. Now God wants us to trust in His word, and not in signs and wonders, for often these can be faked by imposters, and can certainly be done by Satan himself to deceive the masses.

The writer uses a quotation from Psalm 8:4 to illustrate how the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became a man in order to experience death, and bring salvation to the human race. In this Psalm man is said to have dominion over creation, which refers to Adam. However the writer applies this scripture to Jesus, who will one day be given rule over all the earth, thus fulfilling God's original intention for man to have dominion over creation.

In order for God to secure our eternal salvation, it was necessary for Jesus to become a man, and be our representative in death. We ought to be humbled and inspired by the humility and sacrifice our Lord Jesus made for us, and this in turn should cause us to be faithful and obedient servants, who spread the gospel, and live righteously.

When the scriptures tell us that Jesus was made "perfect" through suffering we might become confused, for we know that there is no imperfections in Jesus, as God's eternal and sinless Son. The meaning here should be understood, as Jesus becoming perfect as our Savior. This was something that he became as a result of dying on the cross for us. His sacrifice made him the perfect Savior, because God, through this payment for sin, can offer salvation freely to all men everywhere. Jesus is the perfect man, who made a perfect sacrifice, so that He could be our perfect Savior. He has always been perfect in His divine attributes, and now in salvation He has become our perfect Savior.

This chapter ends with an amazing quotation that again is made to refer to Jesus. The quotation is taken from Psalm 22:22 where someone is declaring God's name among his brethren in the midst of the congregation. The author attributes the words spiritually to Jesus, as the one who is not ashamed to refer to Christians as His brethren.

Hebrews 2 teaches that Jesus became man to become our Savior, and our faithful high priest. It shows His willingness to suffer for us, and to identify himself with men, and call them His brethren. He came to be man's representative in death and judgment, an advocate to plead our cause before God. He will rejoice and praise God among His brethren, which shows us His amazing love, and condescending grace, by taking on the nature of man, to be man's representative, Savior, and friend. Psalm 22 prophetically speaks of the Messiah's great sufferings, depicting vividly and accurately the sufferings of the cross of Calvary. This Psalm also looks forward to a day when the Messiah would come and dwell as a man among those he referred to as His brethren. This was fulfilled in the days when he came into the world to die for the sin of the world. There is a future and greater fulfillment of this Psalm, when, in the Millennial reign of Christ, He will govern all nations, rejoicing and praising God among His Jewish brethren. The author of Hebrews is seeking to convince his Jewish audience that the prophetic words of the Old Testament about the Messiah fit perfectly with Jesus who came as a man to suffer and die on a cross for the sins of the world. They needed to understand that the scriptures taught that the Messiah would come as a man to die for the sins of His people, and be made a perfect Savior through His sufferings, and that He would also be their perfect representative high priest. Thus drawing from several OT prophecies the author sets His course of argument to prove that Jesus has perfectly fulfilled what the scriptures were teaching.

I wonder if you have experienced God's great salvation, or have you been neglecting this salvation by taking more interest in what you can gain from this world? Take God's word seriously, and do not neglect the salvation that He

offers to you, for how shall you escape His judgment if you foolishly disregard God's warnings. Today you can receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, by reaching out to Him in faith, and asking Him to save your soul.

"how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him." Hebrews 2:3

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned of the great salvation that was taught to us by Jesus Christ and his apostles. We also learned that the testimony of their message was confirmed through miracles, signs and wonders. Someone might ask the question, "What is the purpose of miracles, signs and wonders?"

As briefly discussed in our lesson today, we learned that God used miracles, signs and wonders to provide a way to authenticate the gospel message which the apostles were preaching. We should take a moment to consider what is meant by these three things. Miracles can come in different classifications. For instance we might say that we received a passing grade on our school exam, and that it was a miracle! When we make statements like this we all understand what we are saying in human terms, is that what happened seems quite unlikely, but when we were shocked when it actually happened, and so we think of it like a miracle. However the true understanding of a biblical miracle moves outside the realm of human probabilities into the realm of human impossibility. A miracle is when God does something that cannot be explained by any human understanding or expectations. For instance God raising a man from the dead, is never possible with men, but with God it is possible. Giving sight to a man born blind is also a miracle, for it is outside the realm of men's capabilities. Miracles in the bible are often done only at particular stages in history, for instance during Moses time when bringing Israel from Egypt into the promised land. Also in the times of Elijah and Elisha, and during the ministries of Jesus and his apostles miracles were much more prevalent. Large periods of biblical history are recorded without miraculous interventions by God. The miracles came at a time when God's people were living in unbelief and rebellion, and were God's means of authenticating his word, power and authority, in order to call His people back to Himself. It is important to understand this, so that we do not look for God to perform miracles just because we want some healing or manifestation of God's power in order to believe in Him. God does not want us to rely on miracles, as this would just show our lack of faith. Remember when Thomas doubted Christ's resurrection, and the Lord had to reprove his lack of faith, and said he believed because he saw, but blessed were those who had not seen and yet believed. This teaches us that God wants us to trust in His word, and not in miracles. Miracles served a purpose in biblical history, but are not to be expected as the daily, normal experience of God's people.

Signs are miracles with a unique message attached to them. Most signs are to help people find assurance of what God has said. It aids their faith, such as the case with Moses, who was shown the signs of his rod being turned into a snake, or his hand becoming leprous. John's gospel is centered around several signs which Jesus performed. Each sign was designed to reveal the identity of Jesus as God's unique Son, and this is clearly stated in chapter 20. The intention is that as people see the sign, they can believe in Jesus, and not in just any Jesus, but Jesus who is God's son, and therefore divine. For it is our faith in Jesus as the Son of God that gives us eternal life. Many people believe in a Jesus, but not the Jesus of the bible, and have no claim on eternal life.

Wonders are works of God that inspire awe and reverence. Some miracles were not done for others to see, but out of compassion, such as with lame man at the pool of Bethesda. Other miracles were intended for people to recognize God's mighty power, such as with the healing of the man with the withered hand in Mark 3:1-5, or the raising of Lazarus in John 11, the stilling of the storm in Matt 8:23-27, or the parting of the Sea in Exodus 14.

Whether signs, miracles or wonders all are intended for a unique purpose, and are often designed not just to help someone or heal someone, but rather to reveal God to a faithless or stubborn people, so they will repent and believe. We see this clearly in the challenge that Elijah gave to the prophets of Baal (1Kings 17). In this story God dramatically demonstrates, by fire falling from heaven and consuming the offering and altar, that He alone is God, and the worship of the false god of Baal was vain idolatry. Miracles are not delivered to the faithful, but more often they are delivered to a faithless and rebellious people. Like to Pharaoh, who after many plagues still would not acknowledge God's power and authority. Miracles are God's way of communicating to a stubborn people who refuse to believe in His word. He does this not only to rebuke their unbelief, but also in compassion for their souls, so they will repent and turn in obedience to the Lord.

When we take the proper view of miracles, signs and wonders found in the bible we will not be so anxious to be running after miracles for our life today, but we would rather trust in God, and in His word. The greatest miracle of all is when a soul trusts in Jesus, and experiences the new birth through the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope you will discover this greatest of all miracles in your own life by trusting in Jesus as your personal Savior.

"And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Luke 16:31

Do not Harden your Heart

In our last lesson we were discussing God's salvation, and were warned not to neglect so great a salvation. The book of Hebrews deals with people who were in danger of falling away from their Christian profession, which we call an apostate. Though the writer is confident that the believers to whom he is writing will produce spiritual fruit that shows the genuineness of their faith, he still feels compelled to challenge them, because they had not been advancing in their spiritual lives as should be expected. Perhaps some of them were undergoing some level of persecutions, and this made returning to Judaism look rather appealing to these professing Christians. It is against this backdrop that the writer is arguing for their faith in Christ, and endurance in the face of trials. In Chapter three he will bring them back in time to the history of the Israelites who could not enter Canaan due their disobedience and lack of faith. This he uses as a warning to these who profess God's salvation, but maybe have been tempted to go back from following Christ, and return to the safer and more culturally accepted practices of Judaism.

He calls on them to consider Jesus, who is called the apostle and high priest of their faith. He is an apostle because he was sent forth from heaven to bring salvation into the world. 'Apostle' comes from a word meaning one who is "sent". He is also our high priest, because He is the one who stands between God and us to plead our case, and ask for our forgiveness. He also represents God to us, by communicating God's word and will to us. He did this personally during his earthly ministry, and then through His apostles after he returned to heaven. The Old Testament high priest was only a picture of the true high priest who is Jesus Christ our Lord.

He wants once again to convince His readers about the superiority of Christ, over anything the Hebrews may have had under the Old Testament Law and Judaism. In the Old Testament Moses was a servant of God and faithful in his service to the Lord. Moses was never a master over the house. The house here is a figure of speech referring to God's people. Moses was a leader among the people, but they were always God's people, and Moses was simply God's spokesman and servant. Jesus was greater than Moses because he is not merely a servant of the house, He was to be master over the house. God has given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus to reign over His house. Though Jesus has not yet fully assumed His right to rule over the people of God, He will some day soon set up His eternal kingdom, and all will acknowledge Him as Lord over all.

Since Jesus is much greater than Moses as the ultimate ruler over God's people, the writer warns his readers not to be like the Israelites in the wilderness who hardened their hearts and provoked God to anger. They were not permitted to enter the promised land because they rebelled against God, and refused to believe that God could defeat their enemies before them. Their punishment was that they perished in the wilderness, and never got to enter the land which God had promised to them. This old testament story is to awaken within all of us a fear of displeasing God through our lack of faith. The salvation that God offers to us through Jesus Christ, can be entered into through faith, but some due to fears draw back because of their lack of faith. There is a danger for us in that it will not just cost us seeing the promised land, but more importantly, our lack of faith can keep us from entering into heaven someday. God has provided ample evidence of His power and authority for us to place our trust in Him, but some people become disobedient to the faith, not due to lack of evidence of the truth, but because of the deceitfulness of sin. We must be very careful to understand the dangers of sin. Sin can make our hearts cold towards God, and lead us further away from Him, and closer towards His judgment in Hell. When the Israelites lusted in the wilderness, God gave them the desire of their hearts, but also sent leanness into their souls. There is always a cost for pursuing sin, when God has offered us a better path. Be careful you do not choose sin rather than following the Lord in faith, for that could be very disastrous for you, as it was for the Israelites who perished in the wilderness.

While discussing the dangers of falling through unbelief we must be careful not to get the wrong understanding of scripture. Do not think if a person has received God's salvation that he could lose his salvation through unbelief. The bible teaches us here in Hebrews, and throughout the book that once a person has been born again by the Holy Spirit, they are a child of God and can never be lost. The language of the writer here in Hebrews 3 and other verses in chapter 6 have often lead some to believe that a believer can lose his salvation. It is important, however, to understand the context of these passages, and not confuse the perishing of the Israelites in the wilderness, to eternal judgment on those who lack faith to the saving of their soul. To understand this controversy, it is important to learn and gain a proper understanding of biblical apostasy. When a person, who professes to believe in Jesus as their Savior, demonstrates through their actions that their faith was not genuine, and they return to a position that agrees with the unbelievers, who reject Jesus and his salvation, then that person is clearly denying what they said they had once believed. When the bible speaks of this kind of person, we refer to them as an apostate. The bible says for this kind of person it is impossible to renew to repentance, for they stand in open opposition to Jesus Christ. It is not possible for men to be saved when they reject Jesus as the only Savior of men. However nothing is impossible with God, and should they indeed recognize their foolish position, repent and believe the gospel, God can save any and all who will place their trust in Jesus.

If a person demonstrates that they love their sin, and are not submitting their life to Jesus as Lord, then they show that their faith is not genuine saving faith. This is true even for those who claim to be Christians. This is the great danger of thinking we are a Christian by our profession alone. It is the evidence of a changed life that will reveal

whether our faith is genuine, and whether we are born of God. We are exhorted to beware lest there is in any of us an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. Be sure that your heart is not hardened, and you will listen to the Holy Spirit by obeying the gospel and following Christ in faith.

"while it is said: "today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Hebrews 3:15

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the children of Israel in the wilderness, whom God was angry with because of their rebellion and unbelief. This taught us that we also need to be careful to believe God about Jesus as our Savior, and the only means of salvation for our soul. Should we rebel against Christ, and choose something else, then we would be an apostate from the Christian religion. Someone might ask the question, "What does it mean to *"have become a partaker of Christ"*?"

This is an important question from Hebrews chapter 3 and verse 14. As discussed in the lesson today the backdrop of the letter to the Hebrews is dealing with the potential problem of apostasy, where someone who once professed salvation through Jesus Christ, has then subsequently turned away from Christ, suggesting through their actions or words that Christ is not their Savior. However in chapter three the writer is only warning of the potential apostasy of those to whom he is writing. He refers to them in the first verse of the chapter as 'partakers of the heavenly calling', and then 'partakers of Christ' in verse 14. This certainly sounds like language which could only refer to genuine born again Christians. We must remember that while the author is warning about apostasy, he is not suggesting that any of them are apostates, or would become apostate. He simply recognizes that this might be a possibility for some among them, since some of them had not been growing in the faith as one might expect, and some were forsaking the assembling of themselves together, as mentioned in chapter 10:25. He obviously saw some warning signs of a potential apostasy, and so he tackles this head on, to warn them not to have an evil heart of unbelief. He is confident for the most part that the ones to whom he is writing were in fact genuine believers, and thus he feels the liberty to refer to them as partakers of both the heavenly calling, and of Christ. We might consider also the possibility that these two phrases could actually be used of someone who professes to be a Christian, but later proves to be an apostate. I say this because someone who partakes in the heavenly calling, could very well be a person who has heard the gospel message, and said that they believe, and follows along with the Christians for a time, only to later reject the gospel and prove that their faith was not at all sincere. Sometimes people say they believe for motives that are less than pure. Some people see some advantage in calling themselves a Christian, and so it is not hard to imagine that some might fake a profession, pretending to be a follower of Christ to get something, or to satisfy someone else's expectations. We could say they were a partaker of the heavenly calling in the sense that they heard and seemed to respond to God's call, even though they never were genuinely saved. We can also think similarly of someone who is said to be a partaker of Christ. This also does not necessarily have to mean the person was born again. The person in question might be someone who has professed to be a Christian, and enjoyed Christian fellowship, heard Christ speak through His servants, participated at the Lord's supper, even sharing the gospel message with others. By all these activities they appeared to have been a partaker of Christ, but only later to be discovered to be an apostate, who turns away from Christianity. It hardly would seem possible for someone to behave this way, but we do hear of people acting this way from time to time.

While we consider what it means to be a partaker of Christ, it would be instructive for us to consider our own relationship to Christ, and ask if we have known what it is to genuinely partake of Christ and His salvation. Many people today call themselves Christians and think they belong to God, but when asked about how to get to heaven will speak about their religious accomplishments, and good deeds. They have lots of religion, but no clear understanding of the gospel, nor evidence of true spiritual life. To be a true partaker of Christ, you must believe in Him to the saving of your soul. It is only by faith that you can lay hold of the salvation that God freely offers to us. Our faith must not be in our church, good deeds, or religious rituals, but rather in Christ alone. He died to pay for our sins, and that alone is the remedy for our sin problem. I hope in this sense of believing in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, you have been a partaker of Christ. Don't be one of those who is simply playing games with God, wearing a mask of religion to keep up a good image. Some who live like this are hypocrites, who live ungodly lives, full of deceit, lust, greed, and self-indulgence, not regarding the spiritual or physical needs of others all around them. Don't fool yourself into thinking you are okay with God, when your life is not reflecting that Jesus is in control of your attitude and conduct.

Perhaps today you would like to take up God's offer of salvation and be a partaker of Christ. You may do so, by simply asking Jesus in faith to save your soul. The bible says simply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved". Why not do that right now, and commit your life to Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

"you believe that there is one god. you do well. even the demons believe—and tremble!" James 2:19

Entering into our Rest

HEBREWS 4

In our last lesson we were given a short history lesson from the story of the Israelites who rebelled in the wilderness with hard hearts of unbelief. The writer uses this lesson from history to warn his readers to be careful lest in them is also an evil heart of unbelief. Continuing into chapter 4 the writer explains from the scriptures how God intends his people to find "rest". Using the story of Joshua bringing the people into the promised land, the creation story, and a reference in the Psalms of David he will explain that God has a rest for His people if they will enter it by faith.

Today's chapter begins with an admonition to fear falling short of God's promises rest. Using the example of the children of Israel in the wilderness, he reminds his readers that they had a gospel preached to them, but had not mixed the message with faith. We should not confuse our minds about what the author means here by using the word "gospel". Gospel simply means good news, and for the children of Israel, they had been promised by God that they would inherit a land that flowed with milk and honey, as promised to their forefathers. The gift of the promised land, and driving out their enemies before them, was the good news preached to them. Our gospel is also good news, but is not the promise of a land, but a promise of heaven and eternal life when we trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Though the gospel was preached to those who were with Joshua in the wilderness, they did not believe and therefore did not enter into the rest of the land of Canaan, but perished in the wilderness. Even when the next generation entered the land and overcame their enemies, they only found a partial rest. This is because some of their enemies remained in the land, and continued to trouble them. This rest would be a physical rest of enjoying peace and prosperity in their inheritance. However God had another rest that He wanted His people to enter besides just enjoying their physical inheritance. He wanted to give them a spiritual rest. Joshua could not give that to them, but Jesus now offers us that rest to us. Just as God worked 7 days and then rested from all His work, we also are to rest from all work by placing our trust in Jesus. The idea of entering then into spiritual rest, is to put aside all of our hopes in religious practices, good works, or trying to keep God's Law to become righteous. All these works can never accomplish our spiritual rest. Only when Jesus died for our sins on the cross was the work of our redemption complete, and we could rest in His finished work. Now we don't need to try and earn our way to heaven, but simply rest in faith in what Jesus has accomplished for us. This was not easy for the Jewish people who were turning to Christ in the 1st century. When Hebrews was written, they Jews had a long history of trying to obtain a righteous standing before God, by observing the Laws of Moses. They had been stubborn in the wilderness, not willing to believe God, and all through their history they demonstrated that their misapplied faith, when trying to acquire God's righteousness through their own efforts. David wrote in the Psalms that, "today, after such a long time, as it has been said: today if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." David lived long after the conquest of Canaan, and yet is still speaking prophetically about the need for the Israelites to not harden their hearts, so that they could enter into God's rest. The writer is using this to prove that the rest promised to the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan, was only a type of the rest that God wanted to give them. The rest God wants us all to enter is freedom from seeking to justification by our works, resting alone in God's free salvation.

We are exhorted to be diligent to enter this rest, and by this he means we should be very careful to hear and respond in faith to the gospel. Faith is something God can see in us, but even we ourselves may doubt our own hearts. Can you see your faith? How do you know that you have actually trusted in Jesus to the saving of your soul. We need to find assurance that we are God's children through faith, and the way we can establish our hearts and assure our minds, is by careful consideration of God's word. The writer speaks of the word of God as a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart, dividing things which are not easily separated like the soul and spirit, or joints and marrow. The word of God is living and active in this ministry of discernment. It does this when we read it diligently, learning whether our life matches up with what ought to characterize someone born of the Spirit. Interestingly enough, it was the book of Hebrews which helped me find greater assurance of my own conversion and spiritual life. By thinking carefully about what God has said in His word, about what happens when a person gets saved, and then thinking about whether these had taken place in my own Christian experience, I was given the assurance to strengthen my confidence, and press forward in faith. You see it is essential that each one of us who professes to belong to Jesus, finds our own proof that we are God's children. God knows the truth, but our eyes are clouded by lack of spiritual perception. God can give us greater light, and help us make distinctions between what is true faith or not. The human heart can be so deceitful, and we don't want to find ourselves deceived and forever lost. Remember that our judge is the same one who sees all things, and nothing is hidden from His sight. Here we are told that all things are naked and open to His eyes, and to Him we must give an account. The point here is that some might be able to fool the masses into thinking they are a Christian, but you can't fool God. You need to be careful to use God's revelation in the bible to test your heart and faith before Him.

With this serious warning to the Hebrews, the writer calls on them to hold fast to their confession. These words lead us to think that these professing Christians were undergoing some persecutions which made them tempted to depart from the Christian faith and return to the safer practices of Judaism. But they only needed to remember that Jesus was their high priest, and had passed through the heavens. Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses, for he also faced temptation, but without sin. He faced His persecutors, but remained faithful even to the giving of his life. So in the

face of persecution, these believers could find an advocate, and find grace and mercy to help in their time of need. In fact, in view of what Jesus had done for them, and was doing in heaven, they could boldly ask for His help.

"for he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his." Hebrews 4:10

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we thought about the need to enter into our spiritual rest in Christ. We also learned that the function of the word of God was to help us to discern true spiritual life, and find assurance by diligent consideration of God's word. Someone might ask the question, "Why is the bible called living and powerful?"

Here in the midst of our study of Hebrews we find a most interesting statement made about the bible, or what the writer here calls the word of God. The statement is that the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword. In the context of this chapter it is talking about the discerning nature of the word of God, and how it can discover the thoughts and intents of the heart. Because God is the author of the word, and He is all seeing, and all knowing, then His word has been given that unique quality of reflecting God's mind to us. This can happen as we read the bible, and the Holy Spirit takes the truths contained within it's pages and bring them upon us with conviction, awakening our souls to our need for correction, repentance, or obedience.

God has designed His word in such a way that it can speak into every situation, giving light and understanding on how the child of God can respond by faith and obedience. The bible is an extraordinary book in this respect. However the words on the page are not the full sum of it. These are God-breathed words, and can affect spiritual results, when coupled with faith. There are some people who read the bible and to them it is a dead book without any power. This is because words themselves have little meaning unless their truth is discerned, believed, and acted upon. This does not diminish God's word in the slightest. Men's unbelief does nothing to inhibit God's truth or power. Truth is truth, and will always prevail. There is an Old Testament passage that assures us that God's word will accomplish what it was sent forth to do. *"so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isa 55:11). What this passage teaches us is that when God speaks to us through His word, he sends it in a way that it will accomplish the task that God intended. So the power in God's word lies in the power of God, who sends it forth with a purpose. So the Holy Spirit is constantly at work in our lives teaching us the word, and opening our understanding, and filling us with conviction so that we will obey what we have read. This is why the bible is alive. God makes it alive to us through the on-going witness and work of the Holy Spirit. This is also why it is powerful, because it comes with all the power and purpose of God behind it.

Let's use a simple illustration to help us get the point here. Let's say I write a letter to a friend in a far away land promising to come to Him soon, and bring him a large sum of money to help him with a certain project. When I send the letter I add my signature to authorize my promise, then also send a messenger who knows my character and has worked with me for many years. The messenger personally delivers the message to my friend, and encourages him to read it. After reading the letter my messenger sees that the friend is not yet convinced that help is coming, and so he asks him to read the letter again, and adds special emphasis to the promise made, and the signature, as well as testifying to the truthfulness of the message, and my intent to send the money. You see the letter contains more than words, when it is conveyed by a messenger who is sent to convince and convict that the contents of the letter are authentic and trustworthy. The bible has been sent to us from God, but also will be understood and confirmed by the gracious illuminating work of the Holy Spirit.

The bible here is also said to be sharper than any two-edged sword. The sharper the sword, the more easily it can cut between two objects that are not easily separated. The examples given of things hard to separate are the soul and spirit, and the joints and the marrow. Both the soul and spirit are part of man's being, but are the immaterial part of him. The soul we often refer to as that part of us that makes up our personality or character, and the spirit is that part of us that has to do with our motives, desires, and which can relate to God, and worship. Human understanding here is limited for we can only learn from God's revelation to us in His word. We cannot take a soul and put it under the microscope, nor can we dissect someone's spirit in the laboratory. Only God is properly able to distinguish these two immaterial parts of a man, because He created man. The word can teach us, and help us learn about these through divine revelation, where nothing else would be able to help us. The second illustration of joints and marrow has to do with the construction of bones. Bones are made up of the hard joints that give strength and structure to our body, but within those hard bones is the soft life-giving marrow. Without that marrow the bone would be dead, for blood cells are manufactured by the bone marrow, and the life of the whole body depends on that marrow. The sword can reach beyond the hard exterior to where the true life is hidden within, and discern the difference. The word of God is able to reveal to us if we possess spiritual life, being born of God, or whether we are empty souls, like bones without marrow.

"for the word of god is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

LESSON 209
Milk or Meat Christian
HEBREWS 5

In our last lesson we were thinking about the need to enter our spiritual rest through faith in Jesus Christ. We were also learning about the word of God which is living and powerful through the work of the Holy Spirit. Today we move on to learn more about Jesus as high priest, after the order of Melchisedec. During this discussion, the author would like to teach them mature biblical concepts, which he calls strong meat, but he is hindered because of their lack of spiritual development, and says they were still like babes needing milk.

In this chapter the author wants to teach more about Jesus as a unique high priest. In comparison to the high priests of the old testament, Jesus was not a high priest who needed to make an offering for his own sins, because He was sinless. However, like Aaron, who was called by God to be high priest, Jesus was also prophesied to be a priest forever, after the order of Melchisedec. We will have more discussion of this special order of priesthood as we study the next couple of chapters in Hebrews, but here we just need to understand that Jesus was also selected by God to serve as a high priest. In His priestly role he made prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears to God. Some very interesting, if not controversial statements about Jesus priestly ministry are given in verses 8 and 9. In verse 8 Jesus is referred to as God's Son, and in this context it conveys the idea of his unique relationship to His Father as Son, and heir of all things. Even with this unique and high standing, yet He still endured suffering on the cross in obedience to the will of God. The difficulty here is when the author tells us that Jesus *learned* obedience by things which he suffered. This seems to suggest that Jesus lacked something, and so he needed to learn it. This would diminish His deity, for God knows everything, and does not need to learn. It is important for us to clearly make sense of these words, and I think perhaps the best way for us to explain this *learning* by Christ, is that through Calvary's sufferings, which was an experience that He had not known previously, he learned experientially the suffering required to put away our sin. Knowledge of something is not the same as actual experience. So we can see that Christ experienced something that was new to Him, and therefore a learning by experience, but not in knowledge. In verse 9 we are further told that our Lord Jesus became 'perfect', and this again seems to suggest that there was something lacking in Him. However, the way we should understand this statement is not that Jesus lacked anything in the sense of His divine attributes. He became our perfect Savior, when He gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins. That was something that was not true before He died on the cross, so His experience of suffering for us made Him our perfect Savior. He was perfect in His love and grace from eternity past, but in time His love lead Him to be our perfect Savior. When dealing with the nature and perfections of Christ we always want to be especially careful not to think incorrectly about Him, for this has lead many down paths of false doctrine.

Once again the author mentions that Christ priesthood is after the order of Melchisedec, but rather than go further to explain this, he finds himself restrained because of their spiritual immaturity. He chides them for being in need of learning the first principles all over again, when by this time they should have been teachers. He said they were in need of milk like babies, and were not ready for strong meat. In the context the writer does not necessarily mean that some doctrines are much harder to understand, such as calculus is harder to grasp then basic algebra. He is making a distinction between the Old Testament teachings in comparison to the teachings of Christ and the apostles. The Old Testament revealed certain things about the nature of man, God, sin, and the need for redemption through blood, but it was not until Christ came with the gospel, and the apostles gave further teaching regarding the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, that all these doctrines would come into their fuller expression. Judaism was like learning "A,B,C", or "1,2,3" in kindergarten, and the New Testament was more like high school math and English in comparison. Now the full understanding of the Law could be appreciated through the gospel, and yet some of the Hebrews were so stuck in the Old Testament, they had a hard time moving forward from these basic teachings. The Old Testament was a tutor to bring us to Christ, but after Christ came, then there was no need to dwell in kindergarten theology of the Old Testament. Now they should advance to a greater understanding of the deeper meaning of all the Old Testament types and shadows.

Contextually we can discern the need for the Hebrews to grow in their understanding of the New Covenant, but we also can take some practical instruction for ourselves from this passage. We also need to move forward in our Christian lives, so that we can instruct others. Far too often Christians remain babies spiritually, and need the pastor to teach them Sunday by Sunday. Year after year, they don't seem to advance in their Christian walk, because they are always being spoon fed with milk, and have no appetite for the meat of God's word. Let us not be guilty of stagnating in our Christian maturity. Certainly God did not save us to be perpetual spiritual babes, but intends us to grow up, bear fruit and serve the spiritual needs of others. So let me ask you, "Are you a milk or meat Christian?" Do you enjoy studying the word of God for yourself, and are you increasing in your knowledge and understanding of God's word? How could you know if you were mature in Christ? The author explains that the mature Christian is one who is skillful in the word, and is able to discern what is good or evil. This means that their senses are exercised by using the word of God as their daily practice. A good idea is to set aside time daily to read your bible, and then pray for God's understanding of what you have read. We should read the bible differently from any other literature, because it is living and powerful, as we learned in our last lesson. God can and will speak to us, and teach us if we are earnest in our desire to hear Him speak. When you read your bible, constantly search out the meaning of what

you are reading, do not be satisfied until you have been instructed by the Spirit. I hope you desire to be a Christian who can handle strong meat, for otherwise it may bring into question whether you have eternal life. With all life there is growth, and when growth is absent, we conclude that life is either stunted, sick, or perhaps there is no life at all.

"for though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." Hebrews 5:12

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the unique priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and also the need for Christians to grow in their spiritual lives, moving beyond a diet of baby food, and advancing to solid meat. Someone might ask the question, "Is our salvation conditional based on our obedience?"

In the chapter we studied today in Hebrews the author wrote that Jesus "became the author of salvation to all who obey Him". Being the author of salvation, simply means that he is the source of our salvation. But does this verse teach that we must obey to become believers? Well there is a sense in which this is true, but again we must be careful to understand the author's meaning, or else we could fall into potentially false teaching. The obedience required for us to acquire salvation is the obedience of faith. For God calls on men to believe the gospel. When we hear God calling us to faith, and we obey by believing, then we receive the gift of salvation. However, let us be careful to not make this text say something the author never intended. We cannot draw a conclusion from here that our salvation is dependent on our obedience to God's Law, for this is clearly not what scripture teaches. Throughout the New Testament we are taught that our justification is through faith, and not by our works.

We might ask why the author here chooses to use the word "obey" rather than the word "believe". That would certainly spare us from some confusion, but each word was selected carefully by the Holy Spirit to teach us something. While faith is the essential ingredient to acquire God's salvation, it is synonymous with obedience. Faith and obedience are really like two sides of the same coin. You cannot truly believe in Christ, without becoming obedient to Him. To believe He is Lord over all will require us to act in a manner that reflects His Lordship over our lives, and that means obedience to Him. So while obedience and faith go hand in hand, it is our faith that saves us in a moment in time, but the obedience thereafter that reveals the truth of that faith, and reality of salvation. Having said that faith is always coupled with obedience, we should note as well that it is possible to be obedient to the Law, and yet lack saving faith. This is because some will believe they will find their justification before God by keeping the Law. This was the common mindset among the Jews of the 1st century, and therefore a danger to those Hebrews who had professed faith in Christ. This is also the mindset of many religious people today, who somehow are convinced that their religious obedience will be their justification before God. So then we have learned that obedience, or Law keeping cannot acquire salvation. We have also learned that true faith will always be accompanied by obedience to Christ. It is not the obedience that saves us, but our faith. Obedience is the fruit of salvation, whereas Faith is the root of salvation.

Understanding that salvation is not conditional on our obedience is very important, because many people have stumbled over this doctrine, to the damage of their soul, and risk of judgment in Hell. God will never justify us through our own works of obedience, though He will require the evidence of faith through our obedience. The point is important but easily confused. This is why historically some have thought that James and Paul were teaching contrary to each other. James had said that, "Faith without works was dead, and that a man is justified by works". Paul states clearly that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law. But there is no contradiction at all. James is teaching us the necessity of faith to produce obedience in the life of the believer to authenticate the faith. Paul is teaching that salvation rests not in our obedience but in our faith in Christ. Again we can state it this way: - faith is the means to acquire salvation, and obedience is the means by which we give evidence that we possess salvation. No one is truly saved, unless that faith is coupled by obedience. We cannot see into one another's heart to see the genuineness of a person's faith, only God can see that. It is possible for the thief dying next to Jesus to find salvation through faith, without anytime to prove his salvation through obedience, but Christ saw the man's faith and promised that He would meet him in paradise on that very day. In the church we would appreciate seeing the proof of someone's salvation by their obedience, first to baptism, and then to the New Testament teachings. However we cannot judge someone's Christian profession until they provide proof, and sometimes must take their word for it. We can later expect them to bring forth the evidence of whether their faith was genuine or not. So church leaders might be apprehensive to baptize someone based on just their words of confession, but we must not hinder one from obeying the Lord's command to be baptized based upon our own doubts about their salvation. We can explain to new converts that their salvation is not more certain because of baptism, but will be credible to others once their life demonstrates a continued pattern of obedience. Can you say with confidence that you are saved, because of the evidence of obedience?

"thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." James 2:17

LESSON 210
The Danger of Apostasy
HEBREWS 6

In our last lesson we learned about the unique priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the need for Christians to mature in their faith, feeding on the meat of God's word, and not simply on milk. Today's lesson will encourage professors of Christianity to move forward, lest they fall back to become apostate. We will also learn that God wants us to have confidence in His salvation, which we discover from History, and God's trustworthy character.

In chapter five the writer was telling his readers that they should have matured more in their faith through attention to God's word. Now in chapter six he wants them to move forward, and advance beyond the basic Old Testament teachings, which he calls the elementary principles of Christ. The foundational doctrines of Judaism included repentance from trusting in works that could never save, and faith which is the only means of salvation. He wanted them to move beyond the ritual washings or baptism associated with Judaism, the laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. These they all should have been known and believed for they were taught in the Old Testament. So he does not need to go over these topics again, but wants them now to understand these doctrines in view of the greater revelation given in the New Testament, namely that Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, and salvation comes through faith in Him alone, apart from the practices of the Law. All the Old Testament rituals, and the evidences of God raising the dead, teachings about eternal judgment, were more fully developed and understood when Jesus brought the gospel into the light.

The author now spends some time talking about people who have tasted, been enlightened, and become partakers of the gospel, and yet had not fully surrendered to Christ in faith. These are those who heard the word of God, who learned about God's gift of salvation, and even experienced the convicting power of the Holy spirit. They were so very close to being saved, and perhaps many thought they were saved, but then they fall away from Christ. In the context of this book, they may have returned to the dead rituals of Judaism. A person who can know the truth of the gospel so intimately, then reject it, and adopt teachings and practices which deny Jesus as the only Savior of men, have condemned their souls to God's judgment. In fact the author describes such a condition as being impossible to repent from. This is because the person has seen the truth in Christ, touch and tasted it, with the testimony of the Holy Spirit, but then turned away in unbelief. It is not that God could not save them if they would turn to Christ in faith, but because they themselves have evaluated the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ, and rejected it, the bible says it is impossible to renew them to repentance, because they have said "No" to the one and only means by which God said we must be saved. If you reject the only way of salvation then salvation becomes impossible to you. It is a great insult to God to reject His son, and the salvation offered through Him, because it was given to us at the greatest of all costs. So here the bible uses the strongest language to describe the evil of unbelief and turning away from God's offer in Christ. He says they have crucified again the son of God, and put Him to an open shame. An apostate from the Christian faith is said to be like the earth that has been cultivated and watered but only produces thorns and briars, which are useless, and only to be cursed and burned in the fire. While describing the terrible judgment for apostates, the author expresses his confidence in the Hebrews to produce spiritual fruit that accompanies salvation. When a person experiences God's salvation there will always be spiritual fruit to accompany it, but if there is no fruit, then the profession is just like the weeds and thorns that will one day be cast into the fire. His confidence in them was because of their good works which God would not forget, because they had ministered to their fellow believers and continued to do so. He warns all of them to be diligent to show the same care and love for one another, so that they would find assurance before God of their hope in Christ, until they reach heaven. He warns them not to be sluggish in their Christian walk, but to take their faith very seriously and progress forward in Christ, imitating other examples of faith, who by patience inherited the promises made to them by God.

The writer will use the example of Abraham, and how by faith, he obtained the promise of God. God swore to Abraham to give him a son in his old age, and Abraham believed him. However when Abraham wanted some confirmation of God's promise, God willingly offered to him this confirmation by acceptance of an offering Abraham made to Him, and an oath that He swore to Him, when he promised him many descendants. So not only did God make a promise to Abraham, he confirmed it by an oath, and by these two things made a sure confirmation. In this context the bible clearly states here that it is impossible for God to lie. This is one thing that is impossible with God. Due to the perfections of His character he can never act deceitfully, but will always convey the truth. This means that we have a great hope that cannot be taken away from us in Christ. The Hebrews could flee from the sinking ship of Judaism's works, and place their trust in Jesus as an anchor for their souls. Because Jesus had entered into heaven, like the high priest of the Old Testament entering into the sacred place in the sanctuary behind the veil, so Jesus has entered into heaven with his own blood to make propitiation for our sins. His presence and acceptance before the throne of God, means that we shall also one day be accepted there, because our great high priest has prepared the way for our entrance and acceptance.

This chapter has two sharp contrasts for us to consider as we hear the gospel of God's grace. On the one hand there is the strictest warning to those who would treat lightly the gospel, and not embrace salvation through Christ as God's free gift. Those who taste of this free gift, and yet reject it will surely be insulting God's grace and be in grave danger of spending eternity in the flames of Hell. Those whose faith pass the test, demonstrate by their love of the brethren,

and service to the saints, they are God's children will have the assurance of God's promise of eternal life. If you want this assurance then you must also be diligent in letting your faith be seen through your actions. If you are not yet sure you have God's salvation, then today you can simply ask Jesus in faith to be your Savior and Lord.

"if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the son of god, and put him to an open shame." Hebrews 6:6

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we heard the author warn the Hebrews against falling away from the Christian profession, commonly known as apostasy. He also provided reassurances because of their demonstration of Christian love, and God's unending promise to those who belong to Jesus. Someone might ask the question, "What things should accompany salvation?"

In today's lesson the writer said he was confident in the Hebrews profession of salvation, because he had confidence that they would produce the things which accompany salvation. The evidence he gave for this was their labor of love, since they had ministered to the saints and continued to do so. He expected to see more things that accompany salvation, but at least this one proof was enough to convince him that they were genuine Christians and would produce more things that accompany salvation. We could give a lengthy list of things which accompany salvation, which might be true for some and not others, but let's try to provide at least some basic things that should be expected in the life of every Christian. These things do not make a person a Christian, but provide evidence that they have taken Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

1. Love of the brethren – this is one of the first signs of new life, because the Christian belongs to a new family, and that instinctive sense of love should be seen by attendance at church gatherings, and interest in each other.
2. Love for the bible – Since the bible is God's way of speaking to the heart of God's children, then every child who loves His father should desire to hear and respond to His words. It was the word of God that brought us the gospel, and therefore our salvation, and so we are indebted to this great revelation from God, and should make it our daily delight, enjoying it as much, and more, than our daily food.
3. Love for prayer – This is another one of those instinctive behaviors of a new child of God. He senses immediately that new relationship with God by faith, and becomes increasingly comfortable talking to God, and even laboring in prayer for longer periods of time.
4. Love for righteousness – Because we are sinners saved by God's grace from the penalty of sin, we should through the gospel have a greater appreciation for righteous behavior, and find ourselves making decisions that take us away from sin, and toward behavior that is pleasing and acceptable before God.
5. Love for the lost – Once a person has trusted in the Lord Jesus, they recognize the dire need for others to do likewise, lest they perish in the flames of Hell. We would expect that someone who has experienced God's salvation to be busy telling their family and friends how they also can be saved.
6. Love for sharing – One of the works of the Holy Spirit within the child of God, is to shed God's love abroad. This means that the child of God is filled with a spirit of generosity, because God Himself is so very kind and giving. So it is not surprising to find Christians sharing their homes, money, time, and skills to assist others. Of course when we see those who profess salvation acting selfishly, then we have reason to doubt their salvation.
7. Love for God – The child of God is deeply indebted to God for his grace and kindness, and wants to express his gratitude and love in offerings and worship made to God. That is why times of worship are important for the church, and opportunities to give offerings to God. True worship is unmistakably the fruit of salvation.

When we see these 7 signs of life in one who professes salvation we can be rather confident that the Holy Spirit has regenerated them. All of these signs are true of a Christian the day they are saved, right through to the end of their Christian experience. You do not have to develop these 7 loves in your life, for they are the immediate work of the indwelling Holy Spirit the very moment a person receives Jesus as their personal Savior. In fact the birth of a Christian is often quite unique and distinguishable because of these obvious changes in their life. I wonder if you can confirm these 7 loves have been present in your life, since you professed faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord. This is a good test to gain assurance of your salvation. If you do not find confidence, because these changes never occurred in your life, then perhaps you are not really saved. Maybe you are just religious, trusting in yourself or your efforts to gain access into heaven. Today is the day when you must repent of your false Christian profession, and make sure you trust in Jesus alone for salvation. Call on Him now to save you. The bible says, that they that call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Tragically there are some people who have heard the gospel many times, but continue to harden their hearts, and may not even realize that they have turned away from the Lord. They have become apostate without even realizing it. They think they are Christian, because they have not publically renounced their faith, but in their hearts they have not experienced conversion, and have chosen to live for the pleasures and riches of this world rather than for Christ. Don't fool yourself into thinking you're a believer when you have no evidence of it.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love..." Galatians 5:22

LESSON 211
The order of Melchisedec
HEBREWS 7

In our last lesson we heard a serious warning against the danger of apostasy, and the assurance believers may have in their salvation based on those things that accompany salvation. Now the writer has been developing an argument throughout Hebrews to demonstrate that the gospel through Jesus Christ is much superior to anything that the Jews had under the Old Testament Law. In chapter 7 he will help us to understand the significance of Jesus high priestly office, being uniquely of the order of Melchisedec, and superior to the Old Testament priesthood.

Melchisedec is a priest introduced to us in Genesis 14. He was a the king of Salem, and Salem means *'peace'*. He was also called king of righteousness. When we first meet this priest of the Most High God, he is coming to meet Abraham who has just recaptured his nephew Lot in a battle against 5 kings. Abraham collected spoils from the battle, and gave a tenth of all his plunder to Melchisedec. Melchisedec gave bread and wine to Abraham, and blessed Abraham. The writer to the Hebrews will explain in detail why this character is so significant. He tells us that he was without father or mother, without descent, with no beginning of days, nor end of life, and made like the Son of God, abiding forever as a priest. Now the bible does not record the birth of Melchisedec, nor his death. There is no mention of any relatives or family line. He just mysteriously appears as a high priest to meet Abraham. This does not mean that the man called Melchisedec never was born or had parents, but as far as the scriptures are concerned, none of this information is recorded, as is the case with most other historical figures in Genesis. The writer of Genesis was led by the Holy Spirit to write this way about Melchisedec, to prefigure a greater high priest, who would follow the same pattern, what is here called the "order of Melchisedec". This style of writing that omits certain details, as a model for something or someone to come, is what we can observe in our bibles from time to time, as typology, and helps us to see the relationship between various passages of the bible. It also helps us view God's fingerprint on scripture, as we see the intricate way that God has woven His truth together over many generations, and from various writers.

Now Melchisedec provides for us a model or type of Christ and his priesthood. This is because Jesus did not follow the Aaronic priesthood, but, like Melchisedec had an eternal priesthood. Again, this does not mean that the historical Melchisedec never died, or had an eternal priesthood. Since scripture does not mention his death, then his priesthood as recorded in scripture, appears to have no beginning and no end, and becomes symbolic of Christ's priesthood.

Another important point the author wants to make about Christ's priesthood, is that because it follows the order of Melchisedec, it is a much greater priesthood than Aaron's priesthood. This is because of Abraham paying tithes to Melchisedec, and being blessed by him. The author labors to make this point, that Aaron and all the Levites were in the loins of Abraham, when Abraham paid tithes to Melchisedec. The one who pays tithes to the high priest is not greater than the one to whom he pays the tithes. The same point is said about Melchisedec blessing Abraham, for it is universally understood that the one giving the blessing is greater than the one receiving the blessing. Having argued his point at length, he concludes that Jesus priesthood is a greater than the Levitical priesthood, because he lives forever, unlike the high priests of the OT that could not continue their ministry of intercession once they had died.

The priesthood of Melchisedec is spoken of in the Psalms, where God swears with an oath that the Messiah was to be a priest after the order of Melchisedec. Here is another point of argument that the writer to the Hebrews will draw our attention to. He points out that Christ's priesthood was established by an oath from God himself. This meant that a new priesthood was to be established by God, setting aside the Levitical priesthood, since it proved inadequate to put away sin. Jesus was born of the tribe of Judah, and therefore could not have served as a priest prescribed by the Law, for he would have had to be born of the tribe of Levi, and specifically been a descendant of Aaron to have served as the high priest. However, because of the prophecy of the Messiah's priesthood being of the order of Melchisedec, it must be concluded that God would supersede the Levitical priesthood, with something superior. Now our high priest has ascended into the very presence of God, and not into an earthly tabernacle in the wilderness. In heaven he is there forever to make intercession for God's children. Because of his greater priesthood, and everlasting intercession, he becomes our eternal Savior, saving to the utter most those who come to God by him.

Jesus as our high priest is described here in this chapter as holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, made higher than the heavens. This speaks of the perfections of Jesus character, being without any sin, and thus a perfect Savior. Jesus was not like the Old Testament priests who first had to offer up sacrifices for their own sins, before they offered up sacrifices for the people. Jesus offered up himself just once, to put away sin forever. Through the Old Testament Law priests were established in the Levitical line, but these men were not perfect due to sin in them. God gave his oath concerning His Son, after the Law had already been given, establishing his eternal priesthood.

All of this lengthy argument was to point out that Jesus priesthood was better than the Old Testament priesthood, and would not only be effective now for sinners, but also forever. The Hebrews, who depended much on the Old Testament, its priests and sacrifices to be made right with God, would appreciate this lengthy discussion about the need for a better priesthood. They may have never seen or understood the significance of what the scriptures taught about Melchisedec, but now they would learn that Christ's priesthood was God's plan for our eternal redemption. I

hope you have placed your trust in Jesus, and not some sinful man who has no power to remove your sins. Trust in Jesus today and receive the forgiveness of your sins, and the free gift of eternal life.

"for he testifies: 'you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" Hebrews 7:17

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the priesthood of Melchisedec, who was a pre-figure of the priesthood of Jesus. The priesthood of Jesus is eternal, and superior to the Old Testament Levitical priesthood for several reasons, and therefore good reason for Jews to turn from their hope in the Law to make them righteous, and turn to Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Someone might ask the question, "Why does the bible often use symbolism to teach us?"

As we learn about the typology of Melchisedec, we discover that the bible uses symbols to teach us. It is not easy to see or understand the symbolism, unless it is explained to us. This is the same with the nature of parables that Jesus taught. These parables were intended to teach spiritual truth through the use of illustrations from life or nature. The meaning was hidden in many cases unless a person was diligent to search out the answer. That is why the disciples of Jesus learned the meaning of the parables, because they would ask for a private interpretation after he had spoken to the crowds, and Jesus would explain it to them. Jesus explains why he taught using parables, when he quotes from the Old testament and says, "because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand". Jesus was not trying to keep anyone from learning God's word, but was using parables as a judgment against the proud and stubborn. To receive God's revelation requires humility of heart, and obedience. Those who could admit their need, and came as a little child would be ministered to, with answers provided. Those whose proud hearts were not ready to hear or receive any instruction, were withheld from understanding the spiritual revelations provided by the Son of God.

While parables are a form of judgment against those who are proud in heart, symbolism is frequently used in the bible for other reasons. So many times Old Testament stories or people become a parable, or *'type'* for a doctrine revealed in the New Testament. Because the teaching of the New Testament was also in the Old Testament, in a more symbolic form, it complimented the revelation of that truth. Someone has said that what is revealed in the New Testament was illustrated in the Old Testament. This is so often the case. The story of redemption is told in many ways, and through many stories in the Old Testament, such as the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, or Boaz taking Ruth as His wife, or the Levitical sacrifices. These all illustrate some aspects of redemption. Illustrations serve as good teaching tools to bring home the message with force and conviction. Having so many of these parallels and correlations throughout the bible helps us to see the handiwork of God in the fabric and design of scripture. While the illustrations often carried a clear and loud message, it was the fuller revelation of the doctrine which it supported that needed to reach our hearts. This is what Christ has done through the gospel for us, bringing into fuller light all the symbols and types that were given to us in the Old Testament. This means that God has been progressively making a revelation to man over many centuries. Why God has made his revelation over such a long time, is a question for another day, but we know that this method when discovered and researched carefully will certainly lend credibility to the revelation, and show it to be divine in origin. This is because the weaving of illustrations in the bible, with symbolism, is so intricate and complex that it could not possibly have been orchestrated by men. There are many levels of understanding in the bible, which need to be explored beneath the surface understanding, and historical setting. We know this because we see so many New Testament writings making use of the Old Testament stories as illustrations to support the New Testament doctrines. For instance the story of Sarah and Hagar are pictures of the difference between Law and grace. Joseph, whose dreams got him in trouble with his brethren, was rejected and sold him into slavery for 30 pieces of silver, but God exalted him in Egypt, until his brothers were humbled before him, and repented of their evil. There are numerous parallels between Joseph and Jesus. Joseph becomes a type or picture of Christ, and this is why his story appears in scripture. The same could be said about many of the Old Testament figures, such as Isaac, Moses, David, Solomon or Jonah. Much of the Old Testament teaches us through symbols and illustrations, which convey truth about the coming Messiah. All the scriptures are designed to reveal Jesus to us, and God uses history to tell us about Him.

There are also some physical symbols used in the New Testament that are intended to teach spiritual truth. Sometimes seeing something physical, helps us to register the idea more firmly into our thinking. When we take bread and wine at the Lord's supper, that helps us to recall Jesus' sacrifice on the cross where His body and blood were given for our sakes. Baptism pictures our being buried with Christ, and raised up with Him to live a new life. A woman's head-covering symbolizes the authority of the Lord which the church submits under. Symbolism might be hard to grasp when reading our bibles, but it is essential that we take time to learn from the symbolic nature of God's revelation, so that His truth will be manifested to us, and not be hid from us as those who could not learn from the parables of Jesus. May the Lord give us a greater hunger and thirst to learn and discover His truth revealed in the scriptures.

"blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Matt 5:6

LESSON 212
A New Covenant
HEBREWS 8

In our last lesson we learned about the order of Melchisedec, a priest who symbolized the eternal and better priesthood of the coming Messiah. Now in chapter 8 the writer continues talking about the superior priesthood of Jesus, showing Him to be mediator of a better covenant, established with better promises.

The author begins this chapter by summarizing his statements about Christ's superior priesthood, saying, *'that he is set at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ministering in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle made by God and not man'*. From this summary he continues to argue the superiority of Jesus' priesthood because it is a heavenly priesthood, which presents offerings to God. The earthly priests make offerings according to the Law in a tabernacle which was only a shadow or pattern of the true tabernacle in heaven. Moses was given the pattern by God, in order to construct a model on earth, which was only representative of the true tabernacle in heaven.

Jesus ministry is more excellent than all the old testament priests because he is a mediator of a better covenant, established upon better promises. The old testament priests mediated between God and men, using animal sacrifices to atone for sins, so that they could enjoy God's blessings and protection, and their earthly inheritance. That was nice, but only had promises that pertained to physical blessings in life, and did not provide the promise of eternal life by obedience to its' rituals. The blessing of life was a gift of God, available to those who believed God's word, acting with obedience, but it was their faith that saved them. Jesus ministry of the New Covenant is far superior, because it made the promise of eternal life to those who placed their trust in Him, and His sacrifice at Calvary to put away their sins, and give them the free gift of eternal life. Now we no longer have to go to a priest with an animal sacrifice to make an atonement for our sins, because through Jesus we may have all our sins wiped away freely by His grace.

The writer points out that the Old Testament Law, requiring sacrifices for sins, had some fault with it, because had it been perfect, there would have been no need for God to establish a New Covenant with Israel and Judah. When Israel had come out of Egypt into the wilderness and entered into a Covenant with God, they were not able to obey that covenant, and so God did not regard them, but said he would establish a New Covenant with them. In this New Covenant the Law would no longer be written on stone tablets, but written in their hearts, and He said He would be their God, and they would be His people. *"They will not teach every man his neighbor, or every man his brother, saying "Know the Lord" – for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and the sins and iniquities I will remember no more"*. These words were quoted from Jeremiah where God had made this promise of a New Covenant, because Israel had proved time and again that they could not keep the Old Covenant. This New Covenant expressed what God would do, with no requirements of men to ensure the covenant is kept. This is what we call a unilateral covenant for it's only conditional on the one party to fulfill what they have promised, with no requirement from the other party. The Old Covenant was not like that, it was a bilateral agreement between God and Israel. God would do his part, bless them in their inheritance, if they did their part, obeyed His Laws. Even when Moses was about to seal the covenant with blood, he warned the people that they were not able to keep this covenant, but they all insisted that they would obey the covenant, and so Moses proceeded to seal the covenant with blood, binding Israel into that covenant, which would bring blessing for their obedience, but cursing for their disobedience. The New Covenant was sealed by the blood of Jesus when he died upon the cross. This is symbolically shown by drinking the cup at the Lord's Supper each week as Christians come together to remember Jesus in His death. Jesus said this cup was the New Covenant in His blood, and we were to all drink of it, for it was shed for the remission of our sins. Our partaking of that cup is an act of obedience, but also an act of loving remembrance for the one who gave up His life for us. But the covenant was provided to us, and sealed with the blood of Christ, apart from any conditions that we must meet. To enter that covenant we simply have to believe the gospel, and accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord. When we do that all the blessings of heaven fall upon us, and we become God's children, with a heavenly inheritance that can never be taken from us. Yes our is a much better covenant, because everything depends on Christ, and not on us, and the heavenly blessings secured through this New Covenant are much superior to the earthly blessings the Israelites rarely had a chance to enjoy, because of their failures to keep the covenant they had with God.

Thus the Old Covenant, the writer is arguing, has been become obsolete, growing old and was ready to vanish away. The writer will continue on this theme into the next chapter of Hebrews, but for today this is where we shall end. What we need to learn from today's lesson is that what we have in the New Covenant, is so much better than anything the Jews had during the Old Testament era. Perhaps many read their bibles without even this basic understanding of the difference between the Old and New Testament. Without this basic understanding one could become confused about how we are to live before God in this age. It is imperative that we understand the distinction between these two covenant periods. The Old Testament, deals with the children of Israel and the bilateral covenant God established with these people, with promises that pertain to their land and protection and prosperity in it. The Law did not promise them eternal life through obeying it, and they continually disobeyed God and suffered God's displeasure and judgments. The New Covenant was established by our Lord Jesus Christ as a unilateral binding promise for all those who would become children of God by faith. This New Covenant only depends on Jesus as the giver of life to those who place their trust in Him. Our obedience and performance might give evidence to the reality

of the new birth, but of themselves have no merit towards the saving of our souls. We have the promise of eternal life and forgiveness of sins, because of what Jesus has done for us, and not based on anything we have ever done, or could do. You may enter this New Covenant today through placing your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

"but now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises." Hebrews 8:6

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned how Jesus priesthood is superior to the former priesthood, because his ministry of mediation is of a better covenant with better promises. Therefore we learned that God would cause the Old Testament covenant to fade away as it was obsolete. Someone might ask the question, "How has God written His laws on our hearts?"

While the writer to the Hebrews has been discussing the superior priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven, he spoke about the inadequacy of the Old Covenant, and need for a new covenant, where God would write His laws on the hearts of His people. Formerly Moses was given stone tablets where the law was written by the very finger of God. One might expect that if God gave us a law written in stone, and by His own finger, that we would consider it sacred, respecting and obeying it. Of course that is what God desired, but He knew the sinful nature within man would never be able to keep His laws perfectly. He did not give the Law to help men become righteous, but He gave the law to reveal how sinful we are, and how much we need forgiveness and salvation. While man's disobedience was clearly seen through Israel's long and rebellious history, at last the Lord spoke through Jeremiah the prophet and promised a New Covenant where He would write the law on men's hearts. In Jeremiah's day the people of Israel were far from God, and not listening to Jeremiah as He spoke the words of God. Although God promised judgment on Israel, which did come to pass when the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem, He still wanted to offer His blessing to His people. He wanted to be in a covenant relationship with them, and to save them, not for an earthly inheritance only, but for a better heavenly inheritance where they should abide forever as God's beloved children. The answer would be found in the New Covenant instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, when He went to the cross to die for our sins. His shed blood at the cross is that which seals the New Covenant, and will bring to pass all the promises of God to His people. The early church was well aware of God's Law, but came to understand it's function to teach us God's righteous standard, which no one could keep, and drive us to Jesus for free pardon and justification. When a person came to Jesus in faith, trusting in Him to take away their judgment for sin, then the bible says they become born again, by the work of the Holy Spirit. The new believer is recreated by God from within, and is given a new nature that seeks to please God. The believer also retains his old sin nature, so the two natures are in constant battle, that is the flesh and the spirit. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the new nature that delights to do God's will, God has been able to inscribe His laws on the hearts of His people. The indication of the new birth through this desire to fulfill God's laws is the very evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God Himself lives within every true believer, and directs his heart towards the righteousness required of the Law, and even beyond. The Old Testament law said, "Don't do that, or God will punish you". It was a stern law that demanded judgment for disobedience. Due to the fact that believers have been liberated from the judgment of the law, they feel a great sense of gratitude before God, and that inspires them to demonstrate the goodness of God toward others. The Old Testament law could be summed up by 'loving God, and loving your neighbor'. The first 5 commands having to do with respecting God and worshipping Him alone, respecting His authority over our lives. The second 5 commands had to do with respecting our neighbors, doing them no harm or wrong. But Jesus under the New Covenant would take the bar even higher, and call on us to love our enemies, and bless those who curse us. To give to those who ask of us, and to forgive, even as we are forgiven. The key is found in this principle, for when we experience God's forgiveness in Christ, it would be inconsistent for us not to show the same grace and kindness to others as what we have received. If someone comes to my house with a large supply of food, as a free gift to me, and then all my friends show up a little while later, then it would be proper for me to also share the food with them. For freely I have been given, and freely I should give. This principle working in hearts by the Holy Spirit teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves, because God had also loved us unconditionally, unto eternal blessings. How can I then receive such abundance of grace from Christ, and not in turn share His goodness with others. It is logical, and should be the way my heart and mind are inclined when the Spirit lives within me, and I have embraced the free gift of life from Christ. So the law written on our hearts is seen when we demonstrate the love of God working through us for the benefit of those around us. The law is written there by God, and continually brought to our attention through the gracious work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Ask yourself if God's law is written within your heart? Do you delight to do God's will, and are you demonstrating the love of God towards your neighbors. This is the true indication that you have entered into the New Covenant with Jesus through faith.

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;." Heb 10:16

LESSON 213
A Better Sacrifice
HEBREWS 9

In our last two lessons we learned about a better priesthood, and a better covenant through our Lord Jesus Christ. So much of the Hebrew letter is taken up with the argument proving that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that was pre-figured in the Old Testament priesthood, and sacrifices. Now the author moves onto the sacrifice that Christ has made for us, and how much better that sacrifice is than the sacrifices of the Old Testament period. He is laboring on his argument to help the Jews understand that everything in the Old Testament was pointing to God's redemptive plan through the sacrifice of Jesus. He knew that the Jews would not be easily convinced to depart from their religious traditions. Today, perhaps we have a hard time appreciating the lengthy arguments presented in Hebrews, for we don't struggle with accepting the new covenant. However we can take time to consider the theology, and gain a greater appreciation for the greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ, and what He has accomplished on our behalf.

The chapter begins by providing some details about the tabernacle that Moses had constructed in the wilderness, with its various furnishings. He will immediately draw our attention to the Holy of holies which was a place within the tabernacle that no one was permitted to enter, except for the high priest, and only once a year. He could only enter their with blood, first to make atonement for himself, and then for the sins of the people. There was a thick veil which separated this area from the rest of the inner sanctuary. That veil, and the limited access to only one man once a year, made it clear that the way into the presence of God was not permissible under the Old Testament economy. The writer could have many things to teach us about the various furnishings of the tabernacle, for they are all instructive about the person of Christ, and His work. A careful study of the tabernacle will yield many helpful teachings for the church today, regarding worship, service, the excellency of Christ's character, the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work, the holiness of God, the body of Christ, etc. Since almost half of the book of Exodus is dedicated to the construction of the tabernacle, and much reference is also made in Leviticus, we should not treat the subject lightly, but recognize that God intended us to learn many things from the great object lessons in the tabernacle.

The symbolism of the tabernacle was to help teach us many things about our need of redemption, and God's plan to make a way for man to be restored to God and enjoy a relationship with Him. However the tabernacle, while teaching many things, could not make the conscience of sinners perfect. The sacrifice for sins had to be continually offered year after year, because more sin was committed, and atonement must be sought after all over again. All the rituals associated with purification in the Old Testament were imposed on the Jews, until the time of reformation. When Christ came as our high priest of better things, he made His offering in a greater and more perfect tabernacle. The heavenly tabernacle was not built by men, and was not of this creation. Nor was the blood of goats and calves used to make an atonement. Christ offered His own blood in the holy place in heaven once for all, to offer eternal redemption to us. The sacrifice of Jesus was a perfect and better sacrifice, for he offered himself as a spotless victim, without any sin, and became the perfect substitute, paying for the sins of all men. This great offering made by Christ to God for our redemption should cleanse our conscience from all dead works, so that we may serve with confidence the living God. What this means is that when we look at the greatness of Christ's sacrifice, and how it is the only sacrifice that can satisfy the heart of God to put away man's sin, then we know longer need to be troubled about trying to keep God's law to find a righteousness through our own works. We just could never make it to God through our own efforts, and all the sacrifices of innocent animals.

Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant, and his death became the payment for all the transgressions that were made under the first covenant. This means that all sins that had been atoned for during the entire Old Testament period were at last and finally paid in full through Christ's sacrifice. It is explained that for a testament or covenant to become effective the one who made the covenant must die and shed his blood. Jesus brought the new testament into effect when he gave his blood on the cross, this sealed the new covenant forever. Just as with the Old Covenant that was also sealed with blood when Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of animals using a branch of hyssop. He sprinkled both the book of the Law and the people making the covenant binding. He also sprinkled the blood on the tabernacle and all the vessels used for ministering in it. The Law says that nothing is purified without blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission. Just as it was necessary to purify those things which were only copies of the heavenly reality, so the heavenly things were also purified with better sacrifices. Christ did not go into the earthly tabernacle, but he entered into heaven to appear in the presence of God for us. He did not go to offer Himself over and over again, like Old Testament sacrifices where the high priest had to offer sacrifices every year. If Christ sacrifice was not sufficient, then he would also have to be sacrificed again and again since the foundation of the world. Christ has appeared once at the end of the Old Testament age to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Man is appointed to die once, but afterwards he must face judgment. This solemn verse in Hebrews 9 reminds us that one day we shall all have to face death, and from death there is no return. The bible assures us that following our death there will be judgment. This is true for all who have never received Jesus as their Savior, they will face the judgment of God in Hell, and then the lake of fire. For those of us who have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, our judgment has already passed, and when we die we shall be ushered into the presence of God to enjoy favor with God forever. The believer will face a judgment in the sense of his works being judged, and rewarded according to his faithfulness and obedience. The judgment here in Hebrews 9:27 is very serious though for anyone who has not

trusted in Jesus as their Savior. You might be free and comfortable today, but soon the day of His grace will end, and how can you face God in your sins, to meet His wrath and eternal judgment. I plead with you to seek after Christ while you still have the chance to be saved. For those who are saved through faith, we eagerly wait for our Savior to appear, to be removed from sin's influence, and be ushered into His eternal presence and glory.

"and as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Hebrews 9:27

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the greater sacrifice that our Lord Jesus Christ made for us. We saw how Jesus sacrifice was superior because it was made in heaven, in the true tabernacle, and was effective at removing the sins of the past, present and future, for all who believe in Him. Someone might ask the question, "Will there be a second chance for someone to be saved after they die?"

Today we considered a very serious truth taught here in Hebrews chapter 9, which tells us plainly that after death judgment will fall on every man. There is no escaping the reality spoken of here, and that is that we will never be given a chance after we die to change our minds, or repent of our sins. Once death has come upon us, our eternal destiny has been forever sealed. This truth is born out in other places also in the New Testament. For instance in Luke 16, we read about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man died and in Hell, lifting up his eyes in torment, pleading for just one drop of water to cool his tongue to relieve the anguish and pain. However there was no altering his circumstances, no hope, and not even the chance to warn his living relatives. The picture is emphatically clear, that after death comes judgment from which there can be no escape. We also learn from several passages that God's judgment on the lost is eternal. This means that the judgment will last on into eternity. There will never come a time, when God will say to the sinner in Hell, "well, you have suffered enough for your crimes, and so now I will offer you a pardon, since you have certainly paid the price of your sins". The penalty for rejecting God's Son, is an eternal judgment, and we must recognize this very sober truth taught in the bible. This is evident in Rev 20 where God judges the dead, casting them into the lake of fire which burns for ever and ever. Also consider the words written at 2Thess 1:9, where we are told that those who disobey the gospel "shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power". Here again we hear the judgment is everlasting destruction. This should make us fearful of facing God's judgment if we have any respect for what the bible is saying.

I have met some people who say they do not believe the bible, or that God would never send anyone to Hell. This is a very risky position to take. You want to be very sure of yourself before making any kind of assertion like that. God, in mercy, gives everyone opportunity to repent and believe the gospel, but His day of grace will one day come to an end, and then we shall know the truth of the matter. It would be the height of folly to wager your soul on the possibility that the bible is wrong about Hell and eternal judgment. Since there will be no bargaining or second chance, now is the time to search out the matter, and be certain of whether the bible is speaking truth or not. One man argued with me some years ago, making his claims that the bible was false, and why should I waste my time believing and following my Christian faith. I explained to him that I was very happy in my decision to follow Christ, whether he thought it was false or not. To me it was a truth I was willing to place all my hopes in. I found plenty of credible evidence to place my trust in Jesus. I pointed out that if I was wrong, then I would be no different than he, and we would wind up the same, just dead and gone. However if he was wrong, then there would be a great difference for I would end up in heaven as the bible promises to those who trust in Jesus, and he would wind up suffering in Hell forever. This is why the doubter and skeptic should be warned of the folly, for soon truth will be discovered, but by then it will be too late to make a change.

How about you, are you willing to wager your eternal soul on the possibility the bible is wrong. When millions have placed their trust in what the bible teaches, then it must be for some good reasons. When the bible has withstood the criticism and scrutiny of skeptics for many centuries. When the bible has shown itself to transform sinners to God fearing servants. When the bible is sent into any culture bringing hope, turning men away from sin. The bible has remarkable credibility, evidence that it is indeed the word of the Lord. Be wise and listen to God's warning about His coming judgment on the wicked. The bible is clear, after death there will be judgment, and no second chances. I have even heard some atheists claim, that if they find out they were wrong they will just tell God that He did not provide them with enough proof of His existence for them to believe. Yet God sent His Son into the world, and hundreds of prophecies demonstrated that He was indeed sent by God, to die for us and reveal God's love for sinners. God has spoken in history, in creation, and in His word. He is not hiding from us, and is available to all who would earnestly seek Him. The bible warns us to seek the Lord while He may be found. I hope today you can confirm that you are in Christ, and on your way to heaven. If not, then do not delay for your time is running out. Trust in Jesus by asking Him to be your Savior and Lord.

"most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me has everlasting life." John 6:47

LESSON 214
The Perfect Sacrifice
HEBREWS 10

In our last lesson we heard the author of Hebrews continue his arguments to prove that what Christians have in Christ, is much superior to the shadows and types of the Old Covenant. He has discussed and argued that Christ provides for us a better priesthood, covenant, and sacrifice. Today the same argument continues expressing not only that Christ's sacrifice is better, but concludes that His sacrifice is the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He will use this as a means to exhort the believers to continue in fellowship together, being faithful to their profession of faith in Christ, without drawing back in unbelief.

The writer, continuing his thoughts from the previous chapter, points out how the old testament sacrifices were not able perfect those who brought them year after year. By this he means that they could not be made righteous in God's sight, and needed always to add more sacrifices to atone for their sins. Their conscience was always bothered by their sins each year, because the Law made provision for the sins already committed but not sins they committed since their previous sacrifice. Every year they remembered they were sinners and needed to make more sacrifices for their sins. However the bible had prophesied of the coming Messiah, who would teach us that God was never satisfied, or had pleasure in, the burnt offerings and sin offerings, since the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins. He also said prophetically that He would come, God having prepared a human body for him, to become our perfect sacrifice for sin. He came to do God's will, removing the old covenant system, and establishing a new covenant. In the new covenant Christians are sanctified, that is set apart and holy unto God, by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. The writer emphasizes this point, that while the priests of the old testament had to continually make sacrifices, which never had power to take away sins, Jesus, after making **one** sacrifice for sin, sat down on the right hand of God. This statement is significant, because there is no record of the priests ever finishing their sacrifices or sitting down when the job was complete. There were no seats in the earthly tabernacle, but Christ, after making His perfect sacrifice, sat down. This indicates that His sacrifice was complete, and satisfactory as the full payment for all the sins of all men. Now Christ waits for the time when all His enemies will be made his footstool. His reign will be seen and acknowledged by all. This perfect sacrifice makes the sinner perfect, or complete, before God forever, when He trusts in Jesus as His Savior. This precious truth is something we ought to thank God for, considering the wonder and greatness of Christ's sacrifice for us. The writer once again reminds his readers of the new covenant that was foretold in the book of Jeremiah, when the law would be written on the hearts and minds of believers, and their sins and iniquities being remembered no more. Where God has provided remission of sins, there is no more need for an offering for sin. By this truth we have boldness now to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. This new and living way by which we may enter and be accepted into the presence of God is by the blood and body of Jesus. We can enter behind the veil. The high priests of the old testament were only permitted to enter once a year. Our entrance is not into an earthly model, but into heaven itself to appear directly in the presence of God. This happens in spirit through our prayers now, but will be fully realized when our bodies are resurrected and glorified to appear in the God's presence in heaven. We have acceptance before the presence of God, due to our sins being washed away. We may draw near to God in full assurance by faith, our conscience cleansed, and bodies sanctified.

Christ's perfect sacrifice is used to exhort them to be faithful, holding onto their Christian profession. He said that the Christians should provoke one another to love and good works, because some had been forsaking the assembling of themselves together at Christian gatherings. This is an important verse to share with any who professes to be a follower of Jesus, and yet regularly miss church meetings. How frequently Christians fail to attend the bible studies, prayer meetings, or times of fellowship and teaching, because they are busy with their personal affairs. This says to our Lord Jesus, that His church, and God's kingdom have less value to us then our own business. We need stronger convictions about our attendance and participation in the spiritual life of the local church. This provoking of one another is especially important in view of the Lord's soon return, and coming judgment. Absence from church gatherings is perhaps the first sign of apostasy, which the writer calls willful sin. After someone has heard the gospel, and turned away from it, there is no other means for them to be saved from God's judgment against sin. There is just a fearful anticipation of falling into the hands of God. Under the law of Moses disobedience was punishable by death, with no mercy. The gospel of the new covenant offers a much greater a salvation, so those who reject it would face a more severe judgment. Apostasy is in effect trampling on the Son of God, despising His sacrifice and blood, and insulting the Holy Spirit, the agent of God's mercy. The Lord, in vengeance, will repay evil. His judgment will begin with all who identify themselves as God's children.

He reminds his readers of their past when they had been faithful under difficult struggles. They had suffered reproach and tribulations, sometimes joining with those who suffered for Christ. The author recalls their compassion for him, as one who was in chains for the gospel. They also joyfully accepted the stealing of their property by their oppressors, because they knew they had a better and enduring possession in heaven. He tells them to hold onto their confidence, which would be greatly rewarded. They also should know that the Lord would come soon. He quotes from Habakkuk "the just shall live by faith"; a phrase repeated three times in our New Testament. Those who draw back from their Christian profession of faith, would bring no pleasure to the writer. However he again expresses his confidence that his readers were those of genuine saving faith, and would not be guilty of drawing back to be judged by God, but

would prove their souls were saved by God's grace. Having heard today's warning from Hebrews 10, I hope you will also place your confidence in Jesus Christ as your only hope for entering heaven.

"for by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Hebrews 10:14

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the perfect sacrifice of our Lord Jesus that makes us accepted in the presence of God in heaven. We may boldly enter there by faith, knowing the Spirit of God has washed us clean and made us fit for God's presence. We also heard the writer exhort his readers to remain faithful to their profession of faith in Christ, lest they fall under God's more severe judgment for apostasy. Someone might ask the question, "What does it mean to forsake the assembling of ourselves together?"

In view of potential apostasy, and the tendency of some professing Christians to be absent from the church gatherings, the writer calls on the believers to provoke one another to faithfulness in living for Christ, and remaining steadfast in attendance at the meetings of the local church. Every local assembly of believers will schedule regular meetings, most likely on Sunday morning, but also perhaps during the week for studying the bible, prayer, fellowship, worship, service, or evangelism. The spiritual life of the assembly is expressed during our cooperate times of fellowship together. This is where our gifts can be exercised to the edification of the church, and where we can grow and learn of Christ together. It also affords times for counsel, comfort, and encouragement in our walk with the Lord. God has designed us in such a way so that we need one another spiritually. When we separate ourselves from Christian fellowship, and make a habit of it, we can become increasingly cold towards the Lord and his people. We start to lose interest in the bible, prayer, and spiritual things. The things of this world, entertainment, friends, recreation, sports, and leisure all become more interesting and appealing. This tendency is not something that is easily corrected, for when someone senses they are falling away from faithful attendance, they will also become less convicted about it, because they are already making compromises which lead them to selfish decisions, and not out of interest in the local church. This judgment God may bring upon us for the sinful tendency to put ourselves ahead of God's kingdom. We are supposed to be intelligent and understanding, and God's obedient children. His promise to those who seek His kingdom first, is that God shall supply their needs. We see a tendency in the church today, for so-called Christians, have little regard for the meetings of the church. This is a result of our incorrect views of the local church. We see the church as serving our needs when, and if, I am available. We decide when we want to come and receive spiritual food for our soul. This attitude is what characterizes the church today, so prayer meetings, where the focus is on the needs of others, are poorly attended. Sunday morning Christians will often absent themselves from the teaching, worship, or Lord's supper, for the most trivial excuses. It is difficult for the church to move forward spiritually, when this is the attitude of church members. This is not the devotion that our Lord called us to. We do not take Christ at our convenience, but we surrender our lives and wills to His service, and for His glory. We learn to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. This means turning away from a self-centered life, and giving time to the Lord and His people. Therefore attending church meetings should be the minimum requirement of every one who professes salvation in Jesus Christ.

Our question today is what does it mean for someone to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Well to forsake certainly implies that the person has altogether abandoned meeting with Christians. But usually the steps to a full abandonment start with by small steps, first skipping meetings once in awhile, and then progressing until they are rarely, if ever, seen in the church gathering. I have seen numerous examples of people who slowly and surely over time forsake the assembling of themselves together. They once attended regularly, but later their commitment became less and less until you could not count on seeing them at all, and you were surprised if they ever showed up at all. While we might not count ourselves among those who would totally forsake attending church meetings, we can certainly be warned from this passage, that church gatherings are vital to our spiritual health, and that we should develop strong convictions about attending all the meetings of the church. Sometimes we cannot help the fact that our work schedule conflicts with church meeting times. I know people who choose their career, job, or schedule which permits them to participate in all church meetings.

Church gatherings should not be considered optional to Christians who love the Lord. How can a church carry out it's work if half the workers are consistently absent. If we did this with our secular jobs, our bosses would fire us because of our lack of commitment. Most people are willing to give 40 or even 60 hours of their week to their job or work responsibilities, and yet how many Christians are willing to give more then two or three hours to the Lord for nurturing the spiritual life of the church? Do not be guilty of making the local church a place of casual acquaintance, but let it be the joy and passion of your heart, just as it is to our Lord Jesus.

"..the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Ephesians 1:22-23

LESSON 215
Heroes of Faith
HEBREWS II

In our last lesson we thought about the perfect sacrifice provided by Jesus our Lord, which give us access into the presence of God in heaven. We also were warned to remain faithful, avoiding the perils of apostasy, and God's judgment on those who draw back from faith in Christ. Today we move on from the argument the writer has been making to prove that Jesus is better than Judaism, to several examples of heroes of faith from the Old Testament. This list of names, with their various works of faith, are chronicled here to encourage our faith.

Faith is explained as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Faith grabs hold upon the promises of God, knowing with confidence that God will fulfill what He has promised. Sometimes we may be ridiculed or persecuted for our faith because our hope is not yet seen. Our faith is a substance in the sense that it has real tangible rewards, that while not seen yet, will be seen in heaven. Genuine saving faith bears evidence of those unseen realities in heaven. The evidence is found in the works of faith, which the author will list from old testament examples in the remainder of this chapter. Before the list of names and works of faith, he explains that it is by faith that we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God. God spoke and creation came into existence. We learn that in the creation God did not change one thing into another, but he made things from that which is invisible. God's spoken word contains the information, laws, substance and order for all of creation, so that when God spoke the creation came into being. This is a great thought, and not easy for us to understand, other than we learn it from the revelation given in the bible. We never see anything created from nothing or from just spoken words, therefore this revelation from God must be accepted on the principle of faith.

In today's lesson we shall just highlight these great heroes of faith, and their works of faith, since we do not have time to cover each in detail.

Abel sacrificed by faith, gaining a witness that God had made him righteous.

Enoch pleased God, and by faith did not have to see death, but was translated to heaven.

Commenting on this the writer tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. Anyone that comes to God, must believe He exists, and rewards those who diligently seek Him. People who cannot find God are those who have not searched for Him diligently, but He will reveal Himself to all who are serious in their pursuit of God.

Noah built an ark by faith, saving himself and his family from the flood, becoming an heir of righteousness by faith.

Abraham left his home and journeyed by faith when God called him to the land of inheritance, and the city of God.

Sarah in her old age bore a son to Abraham by faith, bringing forth a generation more numerous than the stars.

The writer mentions that these heroes of faith died before receiving God's promises, but being persuaded saw their rewards far off in the future, embraced their hopes, and confessed to being strangers and pilgrims on the earth. The language of their faith spoke clearly that their hope was in a better heavenly reward. God delighted in their faith, and has prepared a city for these heroes of faith. Now returning to our list of heroes he mentions Abraham once more.

Abraham offered Isaac by faith, believing that God could raise him from the dead, which figuratively he did.

Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau by faith concerning their future.

Jacob, before his death, blessed Joseph sons by faith.

Joseph, by faith requested that after death his bones should be brought to the promised land.

Moses by faith choose to suffer with God's people, rather than enjoying the palace and treasures of Egypt.

The Israelites crossed the Red sea by faith, and saw the walls of Jericho fall by faith.

Rahab the harlot, by faith helped the Jewish spies, saving her household from destruction.

Several others are mentioned including **Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets**. These are mentioned but not their accompany works of faith, which we can discover for ourselves when reading about them in the old testament. He does mention several things that were done by faith, with no particular mention of who did each of these things. They subdued kingdoms, did righteous works, received promises, stopped lions mouths, quenched fire, escaped the sword, were strengthened, succeeded in battle, turned away their enemies. They received the dead raised to life. Some were willingly tortured to receive a better resurrection. Others endured trials, beatings, chains and imprisonment. Some were stoned, others cut in pieces, tempted, or slain by the sword. They wandered with the poorest of clothing, destitute, afflicted or tormented. The writer says that the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts, mountains, dens and caves. All these obtained a good testimony through faith, but did not receive the promise, for God had something better to provide through the gospel, which these old testament heroes would also be blessed by, along with all Christians of the New Testament era.

The author of Hebrews has brought to the attention of his readers the many great heroes of faith from the Old Testament, and how they did great works by faith, but did not receive all the promises that God had in store for them, because God wanted to give them the greater riches that would be found in Christ. He says all this to encourage the Hebrews to stand strong in Christ, for while they may not see the full reward of the Christian life in their immediate experience, one day, just as the old testament believers, they would come into their true inheritance, when the Lord would reward their faith with all the riches of everlasting joy in heaven. We may lay hold of these riches by faith when we trust in Jesus as our Savior. You will not see the rewards of faith immediately, but by faith you can lay hold upon that which God promises to all those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Your faith will

need to be tested though, just as those old testament heroes of faith, who believed and obey God against great obstacles and much opposition. Does your faith provide evidence of the things you are hoping for?

"now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the great heroes of faith of the old testament era, and how they through their works of faith obtained a witness that they were God's people, and would one day be blessed to receive a greater inheritance in heaven with all Christians. Someone might ask the question, "Does faith always require suffering?"

When reading through Hebrews 11 and hearing of all those great men and women of faith, and all they accomplished through faith, it is striking to notice how much each of them seems to have suffered because of their faith in God. Starting with Abel who offered the better sacrifice. We find that his brother Cain became jealous and killed him. Since that time men of faith have always been persecuted by men who are not of faith. This appears to be a rather consistent pattern as we recount those mentioned in Hebrews 11. The Christian must be prepared to face opposition from those who are opponents of faith. We understand that Satan has been on the prowl continually seeking to devour those who love and serve God. Satan in his bitterness and hatred of God lashes out against all the children of faith. The more serious the Christian, and the greater his work is for God, the more Satan will target that believer. We see evidence of this in Hebrews 11, as we think of the various people mentioned. Moses was a thorn in the side of Pharaoh, such that he wanted to have Moses killed, and pursued him and the Israelites with his army. Moses suffered the rebellion and complaints of the people, and never got to the promised land himself, but only saw it from afar. Noah too preached righteousness, but the people scorned him and did not heed his warnings, so he too had to suffer the rejection of others to stand with God in judgment. Many of the sufferings of the prophets are mentioned in Hebrews 11 leading us to conclude that suffering is certainly associated with the children of faith. However our question today is, "does faith *always* require suffering?" Well in one sense we could say yes to this question, because we must all be willing to suffer the reproach of Christ. Perhaps our family, friends, school mates, or work mates do not approve of our stand for Christ. They might mock or even persecute us, and we must be willing to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel, and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. We might be fortunate to be surrounded by others who love and serve the Lord Jesus, and therefore we find very little opposition to our faith. However there is another way in which the believer suffers by his faith, and that is through his personal battle against sin and the flesh. Our sinful nature tempts to enjoy sin, but the new nature resists the temptation. There is an internal battle, and sometimes the battle rages deeply in the life and experience of the believer. So in this sense he enters into another fierce battle and can often suffer from this battle. If we do not have any battles against sin, and we feel perfectly content, then likely something is wrong with us spiritually. Perhaps we are not even saved. Believers ought to experience struggles and trials of faith, as we try to overcome temptations, or the flesh which wars with the spirit. It is when we feel the sword of this battle with sin, that we gain confidence that we are children of faith. Certainly Satan will never be happy when Christians preach Christ, or live in a manner that testifies to the power and grace of God at work in our lives. He will try to put stumbling blocks before us, or even send us affliction, persecution, or opposition to discourage us and bring us down. Yes, every Christian should be prepared for battle, and for suffering. The more a person expresses their faith, the more they can expect to suffer for their faith. Those who know nothing of suffering as a believer, are likely not believers at all.

Now just think of this for a minute. The life of following Christ in faith is not a promise of ease and acceptance. It is a life of sorrow, suffering and opposition. Satan, the world, and our own flesh will war against the work of the Holy Spirit in us, and through us. We should be aware of this, and not pretend or preach a false form of Christianity, by telling people, that if they trust in Jesus, He will fix all their problems, heal all their diseases, make them rich and prosperous, and popular with everyone. This is the kind of preaching we often hear today. We hear some preaching that God wants to build your business, and increase your wealth, make you the head and not the tail. These preachers twist scripture to make faith a means to personal success in this world. Hebrews 11 would teach us that the life of faith will rob us of comfort and ease in this world, making us people hated and persecuted by a world that does not want the God of the bible. Instead people want a different God, and different gospel, where they can be happy and wealthy in the world. The God of the bible can give you all the riches of heaven, but it will cost you all the loss of all your possessions and hopes in this world. You cannot have it both ways, for Jesus said we cannot serve God and money. When we choose to follow God in faith, it will mean much sacrifice, suffering and loss now, but reward in heaven. Faith does not cling to this world, but has its' hope fixed in heaven, and this means enduring suffering as a children of faith.

"for to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake."
Philippians 1:29

LESSON 216
Unshakeable Kingdom
HEBREWS 12

In our last lesson we learned about the great heroes of faith from the old testament. This list of heroes suffered for their faith, and have set forth an example for believers to expect and endure suffering for the sake of the gospel. Today we move onto chapter 12 of Hebrews where we are exhorted to receive chastening from God, which is an expression of our genuine relationship to God as our Father. Also we will learn that Christians belong to an unshakeable kingdom through our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The writer begins this chapter by speaking of the great cloud of witnesses mentioned in the last chapter. In view of their example of strong faith, even under great trial and persecutions, we are exhorted to lay aside all that weighs us down, and sins that continue to trouble us. We should run the Christian race with patience. The Christian life is not easy to live, because we do face challenges to our faith, and we struggle against sin. It is like a runner in a race, he may grow weary as he strives towards the goal, but if he pushes himself and remains faithful to his cause, he shall cross the finish line with joy. We can look to Jesus as our great example, for he is both the beginning and end of our faith. We looked to Jesus for salvation as we began our Christian life, and throughout the Christian life He is the one we trust in for transforming us into His image, and then safely taking us to heaven someday. We should carefully consider Jesus and what He endured on the cross for our redemption. Not only was He willing to accept the suffering and shame for us, He now sits at the right hand of God's throne in heaven, interceding for us. It would seem to many to be a great contradiction for Jesus to give His life for His enemies. The very people who cried out for His death, were the people He loved, and offered salvation to. As we consider what He endured for us, we should be encouraged to not grow weary or faint in our minds. The idea is that they could be discouraged and ready to give up in the face of opposition and persecution. The writer says they should strive more against sin, for they have not yet resisted to the point of blood, or giving up their lives for their faith. This teaches us that fighting against sin, within us, and in the world, is a very serious battle that all Christians need to engage in, seeking victory for the Lord. If Jesus died to put away sin, what are you and I doing to get rid of sin?

The writer now uses a lovely illustration to encourage the persecuted Hebrew believers. He wants them to understand that often our trials and suffering are not judgments from God against us, but are the loving corrections of our heavenly Father. Just as any father must discipline his son, because he loves his child, so God must discipline his own children. When we feel the chastening hand of God upon us, we need not be crushed or discouraged, for this represents to us God's love, and that we are indeed His children, not illegitimate. When our own fathers corrected us, we showed respect to them. How much more should we submit under the disciplining hand of our Father, who rules over all spirits. Our earthly fathers disciplined as they saw fit, but God disciplines us for our own good so we can participate in holiness. The author admits that chastening is not pleasant, it hurts, but if we learn by it, then it produces fruit unto righteousness, bringing glory to God. Every father is happy to see his son act with responsible and respectable behavior. Since we can appreciate that trials and difficulties are often the messengers of God to help us grow in our faith and obedience, we should pick up our hands and strengthen our walk, walking a straight path for the Lord. The danger is that we could be like a lame man, who has left the correct path, because of the sin of unbelief, or desires for the pleasures and fame of this world. The author is still talking about the dangers of potential apostasy, which has been his theme throughout the book of Hebrews. The encouragement is that those hearing his message would be careful to follow peace and holiness, lest they fail away from their Christian profession, and lose their opportunity to one day see the Lord in glory. In the face of persecution, they might become bitter. Bitterness can spring up from a hidden root, growing into something destructive to self, and defiling others. We are reminded about Esau who sold his birthright. He regretted his actions, when he chose his immediate physical need over the greater spiritual blessing. He tried to repent with many tears, but no chance was given to him. We have a much bigger choice, with far reaching consequences, because we are not coming to the mountain where God met with Israel, but to mount Zion. This comparison brings us back to when God met with Israel in the wilderness. Mt Sinai was covered in smoke and thundering, a fearful place, that no one dare approach, and even an animal that wandered too close was to be slain. The Christian is not coming to this earthly mountain of fear and thunder, but to the city of God in heaven. We face innumerable angels and saints, and the new covenant provided to us by the blood of Jesus. His blood speaks a greater message than the message of Abels' blood, which cried out for justice. Therefore we must be so careful not to refuse God's offer of salvation, or we could find no escape from God's judgment. When the old covenant was given on Mt. Sinai, God's voice shook the earth, and God assures us that once again his voice will shake both heaven and earth. The only thing which shall endure is God's unshakeable kingdom. This imagery is to help us to understand that only those who have found salvation and refuge in Christ shall endure the judgment of God that will fall upon the earth. Since we have be invited into this everlasting kingdom, we are supposed to take advantage of our privileged position in Christ to serve God with reverence and godly fear, since God is a consuming fire. With imagery of the Old Testament encounter with Moses and the Israelites meeting God on the mountain, ablaze with fire and smoke, thunder and lighting, the writer wants to instill a proper respect and fear of God's mighty power. If you and I could see the sight on that mountain so long ago we would have been like Moses, who exceedingly shook with fear. But that was just a small example of God's mighty power, therefore we must be very careful how we hear and

respond to God's offer of mercy and salvation. Today I encourage you to seek refuge in Christ, and run to Him who can shelter you from God's wrath against man's sin.

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels." Hebrews 12:22

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned that sometimes God's children must endure through correction from our heavenly father, but this is a good teaching tool to help us grow in Christ, and confirm our relationship to God. We also thought about the fearful consequences of rejecting God's offer of salvation, and falling into His hands of judgment. Someone might ask the question, "How have Christians come to Mount Zion?"

An interesting and very important comparison is drawn for us in chapter 12 of Hebrews between two mountains. On the one hand we have the reference to Mt. Sinai where the children of Israel, along with Moses, met God and received the Law. The sight of the mountain was very dreadful, such that no one dared come near. They begged Moses to speak with God, so they would not have to draw near to the thundering dark mountain. There is a mountain, which we are to fear even more than meeting God at Sinai, and that is Mt. Zion. This refers to the city of Jerusalem, but in this context, we know it is figuratively referring to the place where God dwells, which is in heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem is where the angels dwell. The angels are an innumerable host, and we recall that angels, while being messengers, are also God's agents of justice, and have great power to execute God's judgment. Amid this awesome scene of power and majesty, with all the redeemed saints of former ages, is God sitting as judge, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who shed His own blood to pay for our sins. This blood carries with it a message of God's mercy and love for sinners, unlike the blood of Abel which cried out for justice against his brother. The blood of Jesus pleads for our pardon. When we trust in Jesus as our Savior, then His blood is applied to our account, and all our sins can be forgiven. So what this illustration of Mt. Zion conveys to us is that our case is brought before the very presence of God in heaven, with all angels looking, and all the glorified saints. There also the man who died on the cross to pay for all of man's sin sits in majesty. In this grandest of all courtrooms, the blood of Jesus is our only hope, and our only plea, since we all stand before God as guilty sinners. Now the frightening thing to consider is that a sinner standing there in the presence of God, before all angels, saints, and Jesus himself, should turn away from the offer of His pardon, and say I don't need Jesus, for I have a better idea than trusting in the covenant Jesus sealed with His own blood. This is an extremely ominous scene of dreadful anticipation, that would invite the full fury of God's wrath to fall upon the sinner who refuses to bow to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The writer to the Hebrews, has envisioned all those who are Christians as approaching God's presence, claiming Jesus as their Savior, whereby they find acceptance and forgiveness. However the danger for these Hebrews was their potential to turn away from their hope in Christ, due to the persecutions they were facing. The writer wants to instill a greater sense of fear and danger into the hearts of his readers, by considering the consequences of rejecting Jesus as God's offer of salvation for their souls. He speaks of when God shook the earth at Mt. Sinai. This happened when God spoke, and the sound was like a great thunder that made the earth quake, and everyone tremble with fear. Then he also explains how God will one day speak again in judgment, and not only will the earth shake, but also the heavens will shake. Many prophecies foretell Jesus returning to earth to judge the world in righteousness. These prophecies have often included signs in the heavens, when the sun will be darkened, the moon turns to blood, and the stars fall. The shaking of the heavens would certainly be enough to make even the proudest heart tremble. It is only those who have been established in God's eternal kingdom, through faith in Jesus Christ, that will endure the thunderous shaking of the heavens and earth. We belong to an unshakeable kingdom, because we have sought refuge in the mountain where the new covenant was established. The reference to Jerusalem is important, for that is the place where Jesus was crucified. It is where he lifted the cup of blessing and said this is the new covenant in my blood, given for the remission of sins. Yes we all must come to Mt. Zion, the place where Jesus gave his life as a ransom for our souls. It is there we find peace for our souls. It is there where grace is poured out, and forgiveness and eternal life are freely offered to the sinner. Turn to Jesus, like the thief dying beside him, and say "Lord, remember me". We need to come to the end of ourselves, realize the futility of our own religious efforts, and see the desperate condition we are in. Then we must fall before the cross of Christ, and beg for mercy, seeking the salvation He freely offers to us. Coming to Mt. Zion speaks of coming to Jesus in faith, and trusting in His sacrifice to put away our sin. So as we finish off our lesson today, I must ask you – "have you come to Mt. Zion? Have you turned to Jesus and accepted the offer of salvation He has provided for your soul?" Do not delay! Or you run the great danger of falling under the mighty wrath of God in judgment against sinners. Your greatest sin of all is to say "No", when God is calling on you to receive His Son as your Savior.

"he who believes in the son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the son shall not see life, but the wrath of god abides on him." John 3:36

The progress of Faith

HEBREWS 13

In our last lesson we learned that Christians should expect chastening from our heavenly Father, as a true mark of being God's child. We also heard a serious warning about God's fearful judgment on those who refuse to believe and enter into the new covenant provided through the blood of Jesus Christ. Today we have reached the final chapter in the book of Hebrews, where we will hear a variety of exhortations about Christian progress in the life of faith.

The Christian life, once entered into, should progress and bear fruit for God, and in this chapter there are many instructions for believers to help them progress in their life of faith. He begins by exhorting the believers to let brotherly love continue. This means that the love was already working among them, but they should nurture and sustain that love, by repeating acts of kindness and consideration which will foster more love. They could demonstrate love by entertaining strangers, as Abraham did unknowingly. Christians ought to be mindful of prisoners, who are suffering for the sake of the gospel, because we belong to the same body of Christ. He then speaks about the honor of marriage, and how God will judge all fornicators and adulterers. Sex should be understood as God's wonderful gift to a married couple, not to be practiced outside of the marriage covenant. He then adds that we should not covet, but be content with what we have, since Jesus has promised to always be with us. As we think about the Lord's companionship we can say boldly, "The Lord is my helper, I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Those who govern the local assembly are elders. They teach us the word of God, and live by faith. As we watch their lives and see how faith works in them, we are to remember them, and follow their good examples. He then points out that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. This powerful truth should comfort and encourage us in a world constantly changing, with no certainties and many challenges. He warns also against following strange doctrines. Our heart is to be established by God's grace, and not a preoccupation with dietary laws. Contrasting with the old testament priests who ate from the offerings that were made in the tabernacle, he says that Christians have a new altar from which they partake. The sacrifices made in the tabernacle, were taken outside the camp and the body of the animal was burned. This was to prefigure that Jesus would be brought outside the city of Jerusalem where He would suffer and die for us. As believers we are to also go with Jesus outside the camp and bear his reproach. Though this statement seems a vague reference, it likely has reference to the Jewish Christians taking their stand with Jesus, outside of formal Judaism. As they identified themselves as believers in Jesus, they would have to suffer, just as Jesus suffered for us, because their fellow Jews would persecute them. He further points out that in this world Christians have no continuing city, perhaps prophetically alluding to the city of Jerusalem that would be soon destroyed by the Romans.

Christians are also to grow in their praise to God, with thanksgiving, and sharing with the needs of others. Praise for God, and giving to others are both considered sacrifices, and acceptable ways of worshipping God. When we share with others, God is very pleased with us, for it reflects his own heart. Giving is not something we are to forget. Sometimes while we are busy with our own affairs, we don't take time to consider the needs of those who are less fortunate than us. If we are to grow in our Christian lives and please God, it is important that we adopt a mind of love and concern for the need of others around us.

There is also the need for Christians to respect and obey their spiritual leaders, so that they can do their work joyfully, and not with grief. They are said to watch out for our souls. Elders are responsible before God for the spiritual nurture of the believers under their care in the local church. This is a sober thought for elders, who must watch over the flock, and instruct them in the ways of the Lord. It is also important for every Christian to understand their responsibility to recognize and submit under God's established rule within the church. To live in rebellion to God, by failing to listen to your spiritual leaders, is not profitable. We must be sure our leaders are teaching us the word of God faithfully, but when we know they are speaking for God, we must listen to, and obey them.

The writer closes the letter to the Hebrews with a request for the believers to pray for him, that he might be able to see them soon. It appears from comments made that the writer (most likely Paul) was in Rome and a prisoner as he wrote this, for he mentions Timothy, who was released from prison, and we know Timothy was a frequent companion of Paul in his labors for the Lord.

The benediction at close of Hebrews is very beautiful and worth repeating, "Now the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen." It is clear that in the mind of the writer the Christian life was to be lived in a way that is busy with work for the Lord, and with behavior that brings pleasure to God. As we grow in our faith, we will increasingly shape our decisions and actions by the will of God and not our own will. We will also honor the Lord by our willingness to work and suffer for the sake of the gospel. The Lord Jesus will be glorified, as we answer to the sacrifice He made on our behalf. He provides closing greetings from the Christians with Him and all in Italy, asking that greetings be sent to the rulers among them.

The letter to Hebrews has been an in-depth study of contrasting the Old Covenant, with its priesthood and sacrifices, with the New Covenant sealed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Old Testament foreshadowed the New, and

now that we have the reality in Christ, we no longer need the pictures which were only intended to point us to the reality. Salvation offered through faith in Jesus Christ, is offered to all. We put ourselves in great danger if we refuse God's great salvation. God's way to get to heaven is only through His Son Jesus Christ. If you want God's salvation today, you only have to come to Jesus in faith, confess your sin to Him, and ask Him to save you.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Hebrews 13:8

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned that growing in our faith involves our love for God's people, respect for marriage, sharing with Christ in suffering, overflowing with praise, thanksgiving, and helping others. It also involves our respect and obedience to our spiritual leaders, serving diligently in the church to carry out God's will. Someone might ask the question, "Why must Christians obey their spiritual leaders?"

Christians are supposed to obey all authorities, whether civil, domestic, sovereign, or spiritual. This truth is born out in Rom 13, and 1Pet 2, and here in Hebrews 13. Ultimately God's authority is to be recognized and submitted to, as our creator, and provider of our redemption. All authorities are under God, and is the means by which order and peace is maintained in all societies. Even in heaven, and especially so, there is order and obedience, for that is how God has established all things for His pleasure and glory. In the Christian church God establishes leaders who are responsible for the spiritual care of God's people. As shepherds of God's children, the leaders teach the word of God, and live a godly example for others to follow. They must also be aware of spiritual problems and challenges facing God's people, and address these, by applying the principles taught in God's word. They are not designated for our happiness and success in this world, but rather are to care for and maintain our spiritual health, so that we may walk in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord.

As those who offer spiritual help, they guide and direct us through the word of God, using God's authority, and not their own. Therefore when we listen to their counsel, being spokesmen for God, then to reject their counsel, is to be in danger of rejecting God's counsel. This is a prideful and rebellious way to act, and suggests that we think we are wiser than God. I suppose one difficulty we might have in obeying the elders of the church, is that we recognize in them, that they are not without fault. When we examine their failures we lose our respect, and are not as willing to listen and obey, for we see them as no better than ourselves. Now, it maybe the case that our particular spiritual leaders have glaring faults, but we should discern whether their counsel is from God's word, or not. If they speak the word of God faithfully, then it is not their word that we are to follow, but God's word. So even when we recognize their faults, we should still grant them the opportunity to speak truth and correction into our lives. We do this because we are not accountable for them, but accountable for ourselves. In fact, as believers, we ought to be humble enough to receive advice or correction from anyone; for who knows but it might be the very means by which God gets our attention.

Here in the final chapter of Hebrews we are given the reasons why Christians must obey their elders in the church. The reason given is because they must give an account of our souls to God. The local elders of a church are responsible before God for the spiritual welfare of those in their fellowship. God will hold them accountable for how they carried out their responsibilities for each one under their care. This is a double-edge sword, because while they might do all in their power to help individual Christians in the fellowship, those individuals might refuse to cooperate with the elders. On the other hand if the elders are slack in their shepherding care, then spiritual harm might come to members of the church, and they will have to answer to God for their slothful leadership. The weight of responsibility falls upon the elders to look to each one under their care and seek their spiritual nurture. With such a heavy weight of responsibility before God, their task might seem overwhelming. At times it also may seem rather discouraging, when they see, those under their spiritual care, departing from the ways of the Lord. It is clear that each person must give an account of himself to the Lord, but in a special sense, the elders of each local church must also give account not only of themselves, but also all those Christians under their care. If they did not teach the word carefully, and by that led some down the wrong path, then they must answer to the Lord. With this in mind, we can appreciate how serious a matter it is for believers to respond in a cooperative way with their elders. To fight against them, or refuse their counsel, is to invite God's displeasure and chastening hand.

Another reason to obey our elders is also given in verse 17. This is that we ought to provide joy to our elders, who labor so diligently for our spiritual care. The appropriate response to their love and interest in our souls is to allow them to do their work with joy, and not with grief. There is no profit to the person who fights against his spiritual leadership, and thus his own spiritual welfare. It will not be to his advantage, and the Lord will ensure that he must suffer chastening, until he submits to his leadership. A child who disobeys his father, will suffer punishment, and a child of God, who will not submit to godly leadership will suffer the consequences.

"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he who heeds counsel is wise." Proverbs 12:15

LESSONS IN JAMES

Barrack Obama looking in mirror prior to inauguration (2009)



Image courtesy of Magnus Manske - [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Barack_Obama_in_mirror.jpg) (CC0 1.0)

“BUT BE DOERS OF THE WORD, AND NOT HEARERS ONLY, DECEIVING YOURSELVES. FOR IF ANYONE IS A HEARER OF THE WORD AND NOT A DOER, HE IS LIKE A MAN OBSERVING HIS NATURAL FACE IN A MIRROR; FOR HE OBSERVES HIMSELF, GOES AWAY, AND IMMEDIATELY FORGETS WHAT KIND OF MAN HE WAS. BUT HE WHO LOOKS INTO THE PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY AND CONTINUES IN IT, AND IS NOT A FORGETFUL HEARER BUT A DOER OF THE WORK, THIS ONE WILL BE BLESSED IN WHAT HE DOES.”

JAMES 1:22-25

LESSON 218
The man of faith
JAMES 1

In our last lesson we finished our study of the book of Hebrews, where we learned how much better the New Covenant is when compared to the Old Covenant, and why Christians should remain faithful to the Lord, since apostasy would bring disastrous results. Today we begin the beautiful little book of James, which will teach us about practical wisdom in the Christian life. James is one of the earliest writing of the New Testament, and it is commonly accepted that the author, was one of Jesus brothers, who had gained recognition in the early days of the church.

James is designed in a similar way to proverbs, though not in poetic form, since James presents short statements as wisdom for the Christian life. Sometimes these sayings do not appear to follow any particular order, or natural flow in the text, but run together as a stream of counsel to help believers behave in a manner that is consistent with their faith. In the first chapter James makes several references to the man of faith, which can be applied to any Christian.

The letter is addressed to Jewish tribes which were scattered throughout the world. Hebrews also focused on Jewish converts to Christianity, since in the early church most believers were of a Jewish background. He addresses the audience as brethren and says they should count it joy when they fall into trials. The reason for the joy is not the trial itself, but what the trial can produce in our Christian character, namely patience. Patience is an important Christian virtue, and the first attribute of love. Patience, as it develops in our character, makes us grow towards maturity.

The brother of low degree should rejoice, not because of his poverty, or because of his lack of standing in society, but rather because God exalts him. God cares for the poor or struggling brother, and answers his faith with good things. Those who are rich, so often do not care about others, and so God will bring them lower. Riches fade away, but a person who hopes in Christ will have eternal wealth.

Then there is the man who endures temptation. When he passes the test, and resists the temptation he is proving that He has been given power through the Holy Spirit to live godly. His faith is revealed by his ability to withstand temptation, proving his justification and possession of eternal life. This man is rewarded with a crown of life. Temptations are not from God, but he allows them for our good. God does not tempt us to do evil, but when we are tempted he looks for how we will respond. There is an important truth revealed here concerning why men sin. He points out that temptations come from within man, when his lust draws him towards sin. When lust is acted upon it produces sin, and sin will only lead towards destruction. Knowing how sin begins with lust, should help us to deal with sinful habits, by ensuring that we do not allow the temptation to even be near to us. It only takes a look to begin the process which leads to sin and death. This is certainly the case with the story of David looking on Bathsheba when she was bathing.

God is good, and gives life through his word to those who have placed their trust in Jesus. The Jewish Christians of the first century were like first-fruits that promised a great harvest of souls for God. When God gives, he does so according to his perfect and unchangeable character, such that He will also supply us with what is the very best for our eternal good. We often hear people say, "God is good all the time", which is accurate, and precisely what James teaches here in this chapter.

As believers, we must respond to God's goodness by a willingness to listen, and not allow anger to control our conduct. Anger does not generally lead us to act in way that agrees with God's character. It is possible to be angry with what God is angry with, but in most cases our anger is motivated by pride, selfishness, or other character weaknesses. We should control our temper, and remove all bad behavior that comes out of our lives to hurt others. As we allow God's word to be deeply planted within our hearts, it brings salvation, not just from the penalty of our sin, but also from the power of sin to control us.

The word of God is important in the life of the believer. It is a book to be understood and obeyed. We don't want to be like someone who looks at his faults in the mirror, but does nothing to correct his appearance. As we learn from God's word what needs changing in us, such as lust, greed, pride, selfishness, or laziness, we are to allow God's word to correct us. We are to read and study God's word for this very purpose. As we daily put it into practice we shall find a life of God's blessings which is what we all desire. The word of God is here called the perfect law of liberty, because God's laws were not intended to bring us into bondage, but provide us the wonderful liberty of a conscience at peace with God, through faith and obedience that pleases God.

Another saying of wisdom James provides has to do with religious hypocrites. They may call themselves a Christian, but when you hear them talk you will notice they have no control or restraint, using the same filthy talk and attitudes of the world. Such a person is only deceiving themselves, and their religion is useless. True Christianity is made evident by godly conduct and wholesome thoughts and words.

The final wisdom offered to the man of faith is given in contrast to the religious hypocrite. This is to offer help to widows and orphans. Those who have no means of support, are of special interest to the compassion and care of the Almighty. When we join with His heart of kindness in helping these needy people, then we have what is called pure and undefiled religion. That means our Christianity is authentic and pleasing to the Lord. Can you see evidence of

authentic Christianity in your own good works, by which you show care towards others in need? Make sure you are not just a religious hypocrite, but a genuine man or woman of faith. You may know the bible, but you also must practice what it teaches. Today if you need God's salvation, then take this opportunity to confess your sinful condition to God, and ask for His forgiveness and the gift of eternal life.

"of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures."
James 1:18

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned wisdom for the man of faith. The Christian should grow in patience, display humility, endure temptations, control his temper, purge bad behavior, using the word to correct faults. We are to be sincere in our faith by caring for the needy. Someone might ask the question, "What does it mean to keep oneself unspotted from the world?"

The last instruction of wisdom for chapter 1 includes the note that we should keep ourselves unspotted from the world, if we want to have a religion that is pure and undefiled. It is nice to offer Christian love and charity to those less fortunate than ourselves, but even that will not provide a perfect Christian testimony. To act as Christ, not only involves our positive works that agree with his heart of kindness and compassion, it also agrees with his character of justice, and holiness. We must ensure that our conduct is not tainted with the rebellion and sinful ways of this world. Those forces which rejected and crucified Jesus, are still very much at work in our world today. This might not be easily discerned on the surface, but looking deeper, we recognize the devil's devices to draw us away from Christ, and to the trappings of this world. The world is where we live, but I am not speaking of the created world, which God has made, but the world which man has made for himself. This is a world which does not acknowledge God, nor submits to God's rule and righteousness. This we see everywhere we go. The world is generally run on the principals of greed, and self pleasure. These motivate most people in their pursuits, whether education, career, or self advancement. We have created a world, in which we may run after all those things in life which give us what we desire, and we can do this without answering to God. This allows the sin nature to have it's full freedom of expression, so that almost anything is permitted. Of course there must always be some levels of restraint in the world, like laws and policies to govern our conduct, for we all recognize that we need to get along in this world and respect each others rights. However the more that society gives way to the desires within man, which are corrupted by sin, the more we see how the world is a place filled with pain, sorrow, hate, and selfishness. Into this world that is full of rebellion, and hatred towards God, we find ourselves, and so often we can become caught away with it's attractions and influences. This world promotes the glory of man. We see how men run after fame, money, lust, pleasure, and power, but not for the good of others, because of a love of self. By focusing so much on our self, we are thereby showing that we do not love and care about others. This heart of selfishness, is the character of our world. The Christian, who has been given a new heart, is to separate himself from the world's ways. Let us think of some practical examples that will help us to understand and apply this point. Lets think of a Christian man in his work place, where all the others are stealing from the company. They pressure the Christian to do the same because they don't want him to reveal their conduct to the boss. If the Christian refuses, he will be persecuted by his fellow-workers, even if he has not done anything against them. He has been true to his Christianity and remained unspotted from the world. Let's also think of the Christian woman who wants to wear the latest fashion clothing to a party she has been invited to attend. She feels the pressure of her peers to keep up a good image, even though the clothing is beyond her families budget to afford, and speaks of covetousness and self-glory. As she gives way to the fashions of the world, that exalt self, and glory in man, she is becoming spotted, or corrupted by the world. A godly woman would be content not to be extravagant, knowing that her beauty, as God's sees it, is within, as seen in gentle and meek spirit. There are so many examples we could think of but perhaps it would help to set standards by which to judge whether the world is corrupting us or not.

1. We should ask if the activity brings glory to man or to God.
2. We could also ask, does this thing give honor to God by acknowledging and obeying His word.
3. We might also consider if this behavior will be helpful or hurtful to fellow Christians.
4. We should consider whether Jesus would be happy sitting beside us as we participate in it.
5. We can ask if this activity is something that allows me to freely share the gospel with others or not.

When we give ourselves these kinds of standards for our conduct in the world, it will help us as Christians to avoid things which do not honor our Lord. The world is full of sin and corruption, and it will take a real positive effort on the part of every Christian to fight the temptation to go with the flow of society, rather than to take a stand apart from others. May God grant us strength to live Christian lives that remain unspotted from the world.

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." 1John 2:15

Faith without works is Dead!

JAMES 2

In our last lesson we were introduced to the book of James, which provides us with sayings of wisdom to guide the Christian. Today we continue into the second chapter which speaks to us of the need for impartiality among Christians. We shall also learn that faith must produce works to authenticate its reality.

James two is a very important passage in our New Testament teaching us about the nature of faith in the life of every Christian believer. Once a person has placed their trust in Jesus there are certain ways in which faith is expected to behave. When a person's conduct does not agree with their profession of faith we have every reason to doubt whether they possess true saving faith. We shall learn that while many might profess to have faith, their words are meaningless without some works which testify to their faith.

The chapter begins with an exhortation to the believers to not have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ while acting with partiality. This means to favor some more than others for the advantage it can bring to us. He envisions a couple of visitors coming into the church meeting. They are both welcomed, however the one wearing expensive clothing and gold jewelry is asked to sit in a nice seat, while the one who looks poor is asked to sit in a lowly place. This means that the one who seated them, has pre-judged the men by their outward appearance, and assessment of their wealth in this world. No thought was given to their relationship to Christ, only how rich they are. We all tend to favor those who are wealthier, or have greater status in society. We do this because we favor some people, hoping to gain some advantage for ourselves. Because the poor man cannot offer anything to us, and will likely only beg us for help, we tend to treat him with less dignity or respect. This mindset is completely wrong for a Christian, because we are all guilty before God as wretched sinners, and should see ourselves as weak, poor, and needy in God's presence. The Christian church is no place for prideful displays, and favoritism. God does not play favorites. In fact, it is rich men who oppress the poor, taking them to court to rob them of whatever they can get from them. They are also proud and blaspheme the name of God. However poor people are chosen by God to be rich in faith. Poor people know they are in need of God's help, and are eager to pray to God for that help. Poverty tends towards humility. This is not always the case, but it is generally true. It is only when a man humbles himself before God, that he may find the grace, favor and salvation that God wants to bestow. Reading this passage in James should encourage our hearts if we would be considered poor in this world. Remember that poverty is not a curse upon your life, it is often the very means by which God can draw you near to Him, and place your hope in Him. That makes poverty a spiritual blessing, not a curse.

James will make use of the law to further his point about how God does not show partiality, and thus why His children should also not show partiality in making judgments. Partiality is a sin. The royal law of scripture is to love your neighbor as yourself. Love treats all people the same, no matter their age, education, wealth, or status in society. God's law demands a perfect obedience, but if a person commits one transgression against the law, he is guilty of breaking all of God's law. So if a person does not murder, but commits adultery, he is guilty of breaking God's law. There are not some laws which, if broken, do not warrant judgment, while others receive judgment. Disobedience is disobedience no matter what form it takes. Christians are not under the Law of the Old Testament that judges with death for every act of disobedience. Christians are under the law of liberty. This law has freely pardoned all of our sins, because Jesus paid the debt for us. In view of God's abounding grace, we are to also show grace to others through equally loving and favoring all.

The last part of this chapter deals with works that authenticate faith. James says faith without works is dead. Many have misunderstood this to mean that our salvation hinges on our obedience to God through our good works. However this is refuted throughout the New Testament. So, in order to be consistent in our interpretation of scripture, we need to understand exactly what James meant. James explains in detail about how genuine faith is shown by what it produces, namely good works. It is our faith that brought us into relationship with Christ, and the effects of being born again are the good works that it produces. He illustrates the point by imagining a poor brother coming to your door, who is in need of both food and clothing, but you wish him well, but do not provide for him either of his needs. James says a person who behaves this way has a faith which does not profit. James challenges us to demonstrate faith through our actions. He provides some biblical examples of those who were justified by their works. When James uses justified here, he means our faith is seen to be authentic. He does not mean that we were declared righteous by our good works. Abraham willingly offered up his son Isaac on the altar to demonstrate his faith, and Rahab the harlot hid the spies as a demonstration of her faith. Real faith will be visible by the work that it produces in the life of the believer. If you do not have something to demonstrate your faith is real, then you will have to wonder if your faith is genuine saving faith. James tells us that even the demons believe in God, and they tremble. Believing that God exists is not enough to save your soul from the flames of Hell. To be saved from the punishment of Hell, we must place our complete trust in Jesus who died on the cross for our sins. That faith will produce results in our life by the work of the Holy Spirit. Some way or another God will allow your faith in Jesus to be put to the test, so that it will be seen for what it really is. The greater the test, the greater the evidence of the faith. As James challenges us about the reality of our faith, perhaps some are listening and realize that their Christian profession lacks the evidence of

good works, and you now know that you need to place your trust in Jesus alone for your eternal salvation. Today we invite you to pray and call on Jesus to forgive your sin and save your soul.

"you believe that there is one god. you do well. even the demons believe—and tremble!" James 2:19

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the nature of faith in the life of the believer. We saw that a believer must not show partiality, and must also demonstrate his faith through his work. Someone might ask the question, "How can I know if my works are justifying my faith?"

If James teaches us the truth that our faith is justified by our works, then it is fair to ask what those works must be that demonstrate my faith to be genuine. What if I put money into the collection on Sunday, will that be enough to justify my faith? Or what if I send some money to missionaries serving overseas, will that prove my faith is real? Or maybe I am even more serious about my faith, and so I stand on a street corner and preach the gospel to people passing by, does that qualify me for having justifying faith? The question is not easy to answer, since the faith that is required, is not a self-confidence that leads me to heroic acts of goodness and sacrifice. My faith must be centered in Jesus alone. When I put my trust in Christ, it results in the Holy Spirit coming to live inside of me, and it is the Holy Spirit that teaches and guides me, and helps me increase my faith. As I learn God's word daily, it will also have a nurturing affect upon my faith. So both the word of God, working together with the Spirit of God living in me, leads me to decisions of faith, that I would not have made otherwise. This might mean standing on a street corner to preach, or giving to a mission, but we cannot be certain of exactly what the Holy Spirit will call each individual to do, in obedience of faith. In the examples provided by James, we learn that Abraham was justified by his faith in offering his son Isaac on the alter of sacrifice. This is clearly an example of extraordinary faith, because it was an extraordinary sacrifice. From this we might learn that the faith that God is looking for in our lives, will lead us to devotion and obedience, which proves to God and to ourselves that our faith is real. We should therefore be happy when our faith is most tested, for it will make it appear more genuine, and assure our hearts. The other example of Rahab is also an important one to consider. For she also had to put her own life at risk in order to save herself and her family. This illustrates for us that faith is willing to take some risk. Faith does not have all the answers, and must place it's hand in the hand of God and trust in His help. It means we cast ourselves in dependence upon God. Rahab's faith really could not see any other way to resolve her imminent danger, then to cast herself at the mercy of the Hebrew spies, and hope that they would fulfill their promise to her, and save her life. Her faith was rewarded because her trust was in the right place, the God of the Hebrews, whom she knew to be a great and mighty God. So faith is not only shown to be genuine by the great sacrifices it is willing to suffer, but also by the great risks it is willing to expose itself to. So you can use this as a gauge to test your own faith. How much has your faith cost you in the way of sacrifice, or how much risk have you been exposed to because of your faith in Christ. Ask yourself, if your faith appears to be genuine to the people around you, or do they see you just the same as anyone else in the world? All the great heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 were men and women who took great risks of their own personal safety, or made great sacrifices by faith. Noah preached when the rest of the world only mocked his words. Moses left the comforts of an easy life in the palace of Egypt to suffer with God's people in the wilderness. Daniel faced lions, and his friends faced the fiery furnace, but their faith remained strong. Your faith will be tested, and if you have no tests then you likely have never been born of God. Every Christian will experience testing to their faith, to see if it is real. Just like in a marriage, the commitment of each partner may have to face some challenges in order to prove the love they have for each other. God will expect that you will prove your faith and commitment to Him, by the risks and sacrifices you are willing to make for His kingdom, and cause in this world. Many have sacrificed their lives for Christ, and have demonstrated their faith in the greatest possible fashion for all to know they are unreservedly followers of Jesus. There are some who will be content to live a low profile type of Christianity, where they do not want to be exposed to risks, or make sacrifices. Perhaps they will drop a bit of money into the collection, but never enough to show that they are fully committed to God's purposes. They may even go on a short-term missions trip, but never effectively share their faith with others, except when under the pressure of others. It would seem evident that the more one's faith is tested, the more genuine it will appear to others. Let's think of Job as an example. God spoke very well of Job, and he demonstrated his faith by making sacrifices for his children, but Satan challenged and said he was only doing it because God had blessed him. So God allowed Satan to take everything away from Job, and even inflict him with a horrible disease. Through all of his affliction, Job never lost his faith, and his faith only shined brighter. He said at one point, "though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him". It was in the fire of testing where Job's faith began to be seen more clearly. This is what God wants for all of us. The fear is that if we were to face only the slightest challenges to our faith, we would quickly be burned up in the flames, as our faith withered away. Don't be afraid of taking risks for the gospel, and making serious sacrifices for God's kingdom, for in these your faith will be justified.

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him." Job 13:15

Wisdom from Heaven

JAMES 3

In our last lesson we learned about the nature of saving faith, which is impartial, and authenticated by the works it produces. James is a book of wisdom for Christians, and in today's chapter we learn about the wise use of our tongue. The tongue can have tremendous power to do harm, but those who control their tongue with wisdom, show Christian maturity. Those who demonstrate God's wisdom will be pure, peaceable, gentle, humble, filled with goodness and mercy, impartial and sincere.

There is much wisdom packed into this small chapter, and it proves to a good meditation for our souls. James begins this chapter by calling on Christian men to not assume the role of bible teachers so readily. This is because teaches of God's word will receive a more severe judgment when they have erred. People are prone to follow their leaders without questioning them, and so if the leader is going the wrong way, his followers will also leave the right path. The prayer of everyone who teaches God's word should continually be, "Lord, help me to teach your word accurately and sincerely."

Now James will talk about the careful use of our tongue. He points out that it is the most difficult member of the body to bring under control, and the man who can master the use of his tongue demonstrates that he is spiritually mature. He uses several illustrations to show how powerful the tongue can be. Horses are controlled by a very small bit in their mouths, and ships are directed by a tiny rudder. The tongue is a small member of the body, but has great power to influence our life and our character. One spark can ignite a forest fire, and the tongue with just a few words can cause great damage. Our words can defile our whole body, and can start to spread disaster just as a forest that catches fire and spreads rapidly. Someone might start a rumor in the church, without any clear evidence of what they are saying, and before you realize it the whole church has heard the rumor, and great harm brought on members of the church for spreading false information, possibly ruining someone's character or testimony. Once the damage has begun, it is extremely difficult to repair the damage. The source of evil speech is from hell, for the devil is the father of lies, and inspires people to deceive. Man has been able to tame all kinds of animals such as birds, reptiles and sea creatures, but has such difficulty when taming his own tongue. The tongue is a deadly poison, for it can do so much damage to others. The tongue might bless God, but with another breath is curing men, even though men are made in God's image. James says such behavior should not be accepted by Christians. He argues that a fresh water spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water, and a fig tree does not produce olives, nor a grapevine produce figs. The point is that we should speak with the same grace and gentleness that reveals that we are God's children, and not the Devil's.

While we speak of the use of our tongues, I am certain that we can all admit that we often allow our tongues to be used to tell lies, insult, spread rumors and gossip; and thereby have hurt others. Let's take to heart the wisdom that James is teaching here, and repent of our ungodly use of the tongue. Let us spread the good news of the gospel, and speak words which reflect the love of and goodness of God that the Holy Spirit teaches us. Our words reflect who we are, and what we are by nature. If you claim to be a Christian, your speech should indicate the truth of your testimony. But if your words are always filled with complaints, contentions, and deception then you are showing others that your real father is Satan, since you are following the devil's ways.

The last part of this chapter is teaching us about the character of wisdom. He challenges the Christian's by asking who among them is wise and understanding? Then he provides them the answer to the question, by saying that any who shows good conduct in all his works, through his meekness, is that wise Christian. Surprisingly we learn that God's wisdom is not a display of boldness and pride, but in meekness of service. Meekness does not imply a lack of power, but rather one who has power or authority, but restrains from using that power because of love and grace. Meekness might appear as weakness outwardly, but is the greatest demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power in controlling a Christian to behave wisely. We are challenged to be honest with our own hearts, and admit when we are envious or selfish. If we cannot admit the sin of our own wicked hearts, then we are deceiving ourselves. James helps us to see clearly where these evil behaviors come from. They are not from heaven above, but their source is from the earth, from lustful desires, and from the devil. When we see envy and strife, there will be confusion and every evil work. These sins are found at the core of our being, and affect all of our behavior, even if we can put on a good show outwardly, trying to convince others that we are good. If a tree is rotting from within, it might be hidden, but eventually the corruption will be seen as the tree begins to wither and die.

Finally in his teaching about wisdom, James describes a wisdom that come from heaven, which comes to us through the working of the Holy Spirit in us. This wisdom produces holiness, peace, and gentleness. It also makes a person easy to get along with, a person who is full of mercy and good fruit, and also a person who does not show partiality, and who consistently shows honesty, integrity and consistency in their character.

While we think about the speech and conduct of Christians, James is showing us, in very practical terms, what Jesus was teaching, when He said you shall know them by their fruit. A bad tree produces bad fruit and a good tree produces good fruit. If a person has become a believer in Jesus Christ, and is thus born again through the Holy Spirit, then they will exhibit a purity in their speech, and wisdom in their behavior. If a person's speech is characterized by

cursing and filth, or their behavior shows proud displays of envy and selfishness, then we can discern that they have no claim on being a true Christian. If you want to know God's transforming power in your speech and conduct, then surrender your life to Jesus in faith, trusting in Him to save your soul today.

"who is wise and understanding among you? let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom." James 3:13

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned that the use of our tongue can produce great evil, and harm others if we do not learn to tame our tongue. We also learned that as Christians our behavior should be governed by wisdom that comes from heaven, demonstrating the Holy Spirit's influence in our lives. Someone might ask the question, "What kinds of speech are considered sinful?"

As we study James chapter three, we have learned that our speech is not only difficult for us to control, it also can be an instrument of great evil and harm. So we should identify specifically what sins are associated with our tongue, so that we can avoid such evil behavior. I think it is fair to say that most of us, have a long ways to go in our understanding and practice of being holy in all our speech.

Let's think of some areas where we misuse our tongue so that we can test ourselves.

1. Cursing – When we wish evil to come upon others, and say so, we are cursing them. In our lesson today we learned that men are made in God's image, and to curse men is to insult his creator. Remember next time you want to curse someone, you are speaking evil of God Himself, and that is a very serious sin indeed.
2. Foul language – In Ephesians chapter four we are instructed as Christians to avoid foolish jesting. That means to use inappropriate language. We are to let our words be filled with grace for the benefit of others, so that no one can condemn our behavior. We all make choices about the words that come from our mouth, and so often we allow ourselves to follow the vulgar speech of the world. We ought to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our tongue so that only goodness and truth flow from our lips.
3. Lies – Deception is sometimes an accepted practice in the world in which we live. However, when we learn of God's character, we see that there is nothing deceitful in Him at all. In fact the bible says it is impossible for God to lie. So as God's children we must reflect His good name and character to the world by always telling the truth. Even Christians are often guilty of stretching the truth or telling blatant lies. Do not accept this because it is commonly practiced by others, for God will hold us to account for every word that proceeds from our mouths. The bible tells us that in heaven there are no liars, so be sure that you are among the company of those who love the truth and always support the truth.
4. Gossip – gossip is when we talk about others, spreading rumors which might be harmful to their character and reputation, but we do not have proof of what we are saying. This is also a common problem among churches, and in particular women seemed to be more susceptible to this sin. God hates such evil conduct. If you have ever been hurt by the gossip of others, you know how sad and wicked this is, and so be sure you are not involved in spreading gossip about others.
5. Blasphemy – when we talk of blasphemy, it can mean using evil speech, but it is more commonly understood as using God's name inappropriately. It is surprisingly common to hear people abuse the name of Jesus Christ, by just shouting the name as an expression of surprise or alarm. Remember one of the ten commandments says that we are not to use the Lord's name in vain, and that any who takes the name of the Lord in vain, will be guilty and held to account. Be careful to always speak of God, or Jesus Christ with the utmost reverence.
6. Flattery – sometimes men use flattering words to manipulate others to get what they want. This is also a sinful way to behave. It is okay to give praise when it is due, and from a sincere heart, but to just praise someone with the hopes of getting something from them, is a form of deception, and does nothing to help that person to whom you are praising.
7. Arguing – there are times when we all must engage in a debate with others, especially when the subject is important and someone's health or spiritual life is at risk. However in the midst of debate, we must always remember to remain humble and respectful to those we speak to. It is never appropriate to become belligerent, insulting, and raise our voice in frustration and anger. This only demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is not in control, and we are giving way to the Devil to inflict injury on others. It is important to remember that even when we disagree strongly with others, we may still love and respect them, as precious to God. We should rebuke sin, and protect the innocent, but not at the expense of acting evil ourselves.

I suppose we could add more to this list by mentioning malice, boasting, ignorance, complaining, rudeness, and others, but we have had a good challenge in thinking about these various sins of the tongue. Let us all try to be more godly with how we speak, so that we might bring glory to God, and reflect His goodness to others.

"let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." Col 4:6

God Resists the Proud

JAMES 4

While we learn about wisdom from the book of James, we will also see how pride can be our ruin. Wisdom would teach us to walk in humility before God, for He will give grace to the humble. Today's lesson from James is a rebuke against prideful conduct. Sadly such prideful displays are seen among Christians in church gatherings.

James will touch on several areas of pride that hurt us, and the first is an explanation of where fighting and quarreling come from. When we see people battling in words and actions, then we can be sure that this comes from the evil desires within us. It is a lust to have more. This lust causes us to covet and kill so that we can get what we want. It is an ugly look into the human heart, but if truth be told, most of us have these evils lurking inside us, just waiting to do damage in our lustful desire to get ahead. James makes an important observation about why we don't get the things we want. The problem is either we are not asking God, or more likely we are not asking for the right thing. God will not give to us, what is not for our good, so when we ask for things that we want to satisfy our own lusts, he will withhold it from us. Just as a parent is not going to give a small child a gun to play with, even if he asks for it with much crying, because the parent recognizes that the gun will harm the child. There is an interesting verse in this context, that says that the spirit in us yearns jealously. Although the meaning of the text is not so easily understood, it appears that James is trying to tell us that it is characteristic of human nature to be selfish and envious. It is for this reason that men always seem to end up in battle with each other. James assesses the human condition of lustful behavior, when he identifies us as adulterers and adulteresses. He makes this contention because the love of our hearts has been given to the things of this world. When we love the world, we make ourselves into enemies of God, because the world is at enmity with God. When Jesus said you cannot serve God and money, he was making a very similar point. The heart of man is either in pursuit of riches for himself, or seeking after God's glory, and you can't have it both ways.

God will provide more grace to those who are humble, who can admit to their own sinfulness. God will meet the proud with resistance. If you can't seem to get ahead in life, you might take pause and ask yourself if your pride is something that God is resisting, and that is what is keeping you down. When you put God first, and die to your own selfish ambitions, then you will find God opening a way for you into the future. God has our very best in mind, if we allow Him to teach us His path, and stop stubbornly going our own way, and asking Him to bless our selfishness.

The devil is always on our heels, seeking to allure us to the things of this world, and away from God. We should be aware of the devil's influence upon us, and learn to resist him. When we resist the devil he will flee away from us. The best way to resist the devil is to draw near to God, through prayer or reading God's word. Also to keep away from the devil, means to take steps of repentance by purifying ourselves from sin. James warns though against being double-minded. On the one hand we want to draw near to God, but on the other we still want to enjoy some sin. Sin is a serious sickness in our lives, and we must treat it as it deserves. Sin needs to die, and we need to bury it and make sure the funeral service is complete with tears of sorrow and lamenting. The scene described by James is typical of a funeral where everyone is filled with sorrow and tears. This is how we must deal with sin. Let it die, and put it away forever, as when we put a coffin into the ground and bury it. By treating sin seriously and putting it to a proper death, we humble ourselves before God, and He will lift us up. This is the secret of success in the Christian life, by going down, God will raise us up. Those who exalt themselves, will be brought low. It is not easy to humble ourselves, but it is the pathway to greatness in God's kingdom.

In the last section of this chapter we encounter another product of pride, namely judging others. Pride, as we have seen, is the source of contention and selfish lust, but also produces self-righteousness. We must remember that God has already been appointed as the righteous judge. He has set down his righteous standard in the law. When we presume to make judgment on a brother, we are in essence setting aside God as the judge, and His law as the means of convicting sinners. The trouble with this is that none of us keep God's law ourselves, and therefore are not qualified to be an impartial judge. By faith, we must believe that God will judge, and that He is the only fair and just judge, who will in the end make sure all justice is served.

There is one more thing that James discusses as the fruit of pride, and that is the self-confident planning of the future. This might not seem apparent to us, but we must learn that as God's children to rest in faith upon God guidance for our future plans. So many of us, think we can simply go ahead and make our own plans independent of God; but that is proud and arrogant, suggesting that we are in charge of our lives, and not God. So James gives us a typical example of how this happens. Someone might say they want to travel to a certain city, set up a business and make some money, in hopes of a brighter tomorrow. However He warns that such surmising is evil, when it does not factor in the will of God. We ought to say, if it be the Lord's will, we will do this or that. Then he reminds us that we have no promise of tomorrow for our life is even like a whiff of vapor, something that vanishes just as quickly as it appears. How often we live our lives from this same foolish perspective, showing that we only give lips service to our faith in God. For us, the situation might be a plan to attend school, or travel abroad. We make plans that we want, not consulting with the Lord about what He wants for our future. We know that we should follow the Lord and do His will, and when we choose our own path instead, we are sinning. Who is running your life, and planning your future?

Is it you, or is it the Lord? Today listen to the voice of wisdom from James, and recognize the prideful ways, that have lead you down a path away from God. Humble yourself in the sight of God, that He may lift you up. The first step is to make sure you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior, so that He can take control of your life.

"draw near to god and he will draw near to you. cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." James 4:8

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the evil fruit that pride can produce in our lives. This ugly fruit is often seen among Christians, when we see the fighting, lusting for power or riches in this world. We see a tolerance for sin, double-minded hypocrisy, as well as self-righteousness, or self-confident boasting about the future. Someone might ask the question, "Is it wrong to make plans for my future?"

One might get the impression from James speech at the end of chapter four, that we ought not to be making any plans for our future, lest we behave with a boasting arrogance. But that is not really what James is saying. We all have to make plans for our future, but how we look at the future is very important for the child of God. We understand by faith, that God holds our future in His hands. We could not even take our next breath apart from His loving care towards us. As God's children, we have been purchased with the blood of Christ, and our life is not our own, to do with as we please. So, if we make plans and exclude God from our plans, then yes we are behaving with arrogant pride. We assume that our lives belong to us, and we can do with them as we please. If we just observe how most people are living their life, we will see that most people, when given the opportunity, seek a better life for themselves. They are seeking a better education, or a better job, or a rich person to marry. All in pursuit for a better and richer life. These things seem okay to us, but they are often a pursuit for the world, and enjoying all we can in this world, for our own selfish gain. This is not the way God's children are to think and behave. Although this is radical thinking for many, but we must face up to what scripture is saying, and stop following the common pattern of the world.

The Christian is supposed to seek God's kingdom first. This means our first priority is to discern the will of God for our lives. We can ask ourselves, how can I best invest into God's kingdom today while I live in this world. Perhaps that means education and a better job, but it might also mean taking a place of quiet service in the church. It might mean making sacrifices to help advance the gospel, or support the weak and poor. Rather than trying to advance our own position in life, we should be thinking of how to invest into the spiritual lives of others.

God knows our needs in this world, and He is well able to care for our needs and supply us what we need. In fact God is very concerned with your life, and your success. It might surprise some to realize that God has the very best possible plan for our life. We don't believe this, because we don't give Him the chance to show us this life He has planned for us. We are too busy chasing our own dreams, and think we know better than God what it is that we need. When we put God's kingdom first, and surrender our lives over to Jesus control, then He can begin to use us for His purposes. That might seem a bit scary and uncertain, but we must go forth with faith, knowing that the God who created us, knows precisely what is best for us. In most cases God's design for our future, will look much different from the plans we would make. That should not be surprising, since we are governed by a selfishness and lust for greatness, and God is motivated by love. When we allow God's love to flow into our lives, and then through us to others, it has a way of shaping a future, that not only brings glory to God, but a future which brings us maximum joy. Do not think God will take away your life, or destroy your life, if you hand it over to Him. God will bring a blessing into your life, that is only possible when you trust Him, and follow His will and His plan.

So it is not wrong to make plans for tomorrow. We all have to do that, but we must first ask God what He wants us to do, and the pursuits He wants for us. So we should always be praying to our Lord and asking Him what He wants, and how we can please Him. Here are some things we know that He desires, and so when we do them, we know He is pleased. We can try to share the gospel message with others. We know that God does not want anyone to perish, and so He sends forth the church to preach the gospel. Also you can help serve the church. By finding a place of service in the church, you will certainly be working close to the heart of God, for all the New Testament is instruction for the church and how we can live and serve one another. As you think of your future, try to envision how you can be better used for God's kingdom. Some people pursue an education and a career, with the aim of helping God's people, or advancing the God's purposes. You don't have to be an evangelist or pastor to follow the will of God. You can choose any career, but remember that your hearts motive must be to bring glory to God, and not simply run after money, status, and the worlds goods. Let every decision about your future be filtered through the will of God, and think of His glory first, before your own ambitions. Remember you would not put on the earth just to indulge your desires, but to bring glory to God.

"For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." 1Cor 6:20

The Lord's coming is near

JAMES 5

In our last lesson we learned about the fruit which pride produces, and how sometimes this is seen among Christians, who quarrel, lust after the world, tolerate sin, or display prideful confidence in their future plans. Today we will finish our study of James and consider the consequences of the Lord's soon return.

This chapter can be divided into three sections, the first section speaks about the Lord's coming judgment against injustices, and the next section about how to live patiently in view of the Lord's soon return. The final section is dealing with Christianity integrity, and spiritual restoration for those who under God's chastening.

James first tackles the problem of injustices against the poor believers from their rich employers, who fail to pay their proper wages. These rich are said to heap up riches for themselves, but their riches are corrupted and will be eaten up and rusted away. The life of pleasure will soon fade as their flesh is destroyed. This is how people will indulge themselves before the Lord returns, not caring for the poor around them, but living for themselves and pleasure. But the Lord is listening to the cries of his people who have not been given their fair wages. The rich tend to oppress the poor, taking advantage of their hard labor, while not sharing their wealth with those who work for them. This selfish lifestyle is condemned by the Lord, and will soon bring about his judgment on such wickedness.

To the Christian brothers, James said they should bear patiently until the Lord comes to execute His justice. The farmer must wait patiently for his crops to come, and after the early and latter rain, at last his waiting is rewarded. The suffering Christian needs to realize that while waiting patiently for the Lord to come, He will come soon, and bring His reward with Him. Meanwhile the Christian should be established in his heart, and not feel a grudge towards others who seem to have more. He reminds us of the patience of Job and how in the end the Lord blessed him more than at the beginning. The Lord is compassionate and of tender mercy towards His suffering children. This world can be a very difficult place for the Christian who is trying to live for God, when he sees others seeking the money and pleasure of this world. The Christian needs patience to endure the evils of this world, while remaining faithful to the Lord and waiting for His coming.

James also speaks to us about Christian integrity. Our words are not to have any hint of deceit. We are to let our yes be yes, and our no be no. This means Christians should not swear any oaths. We cannot swear oaths, because we cannot make guarantees, since we don't know what a day may bring forth. We are not to swear by heaven or earth, or by anything else. We can simply agree or disagree, and by God's grace keep our word with honesty and integrity. Sometimes the courts ask a person to swear an oath to tell the truth, but the Christian can be exempted from this, by simply asking to provide an affirmation of the truth. Most courts are willing to do this because of Christian convictions about swearing oaths.

Now James moves on to talk about restoring a brother who has fallen sick, likely due to some sin he has committed. The reason we think the sickness relates to sin, is because of how James addresses this particular case of sickness. He says the person who is sick, should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over him, anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will heal the sick, and his sin will be forgiven him. This situation is not typical for any illness that a Christian faces, but is specifically related to his spiritual life and sin. That is why the elders are called to pray over him, and anoint with oil. There is no magic in the oil, and it was commonly used medicinally at the time James was writing. An individual may sense that the Lord is chastising them with a certain illness due to a sin in their life, and for this reason they recognize their need for spiritual intervention, confession to the elders, and their prayers of faith for healing. We should not take this to mean that every time we pray in faith we can heal any disease. That would be a wrong handling of this passage, and lead to harmful spiritual application. Besides dealing with restoring a sick brother, Christians are to pray for the afflicted and use psalms as a way to express joy in the Lord. We are to confess our faults to one another, and pray for one another. It is humbling to confess our faults, but can help us live in good spiritual health. Prayer is vital in the life of the believer, and we are reminded that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man has much power. The example of Elijah is provided, as he had prayed that it would not rain, and for three and half years, and there was no rain in Israel. Then he prayed again for rain, and the rain came. The power of our prayers comes from the righteous way in which we walk before the Lord. Elijah was made of the same flesh we are but he walked close to God, and was able to affect great power in prayer, as He sought to serve God, and be His witness to a wicked generation.

Christians are bound to sin, and when they do, how kind of a Christian brother to come along side and convert him from his sinful behavior. When we in love help to restore a fallen brother to Christ, we save his soul, and hide a multitude of sins. The salvation spoken of here is not the salvation from the penalty of sin, for only Christ can pay the price for our sins. However when Christians fall into sinful practices, they need to be restored to the Lord, and fellowship with the Lord's people. To rescue a soul from the damages of sin, is to save them from the Lord's chastening, and the consequences of continued sin. We are all prone to fall into sin, so we need to have compassion on fellow believers, not seeking to shame them, when they are ready to confess and forsake their sin. Be careful when dealing with another's sin, remembering that you too are just as likely, and probably just as guilty of sin. The remedy for our sin is to trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. He can offer a full and free pardon from the judgment

of God against our sin. But we also need His daily grace to help us in the battle against sin, since we all face temptation to sin throughout our time in this world. James presents us with teachings on practical wisdom, concluding this letter with a message of salvation. I hope you have accepted God's free gift through faith in Jesus Christ.

"confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." James 5:16

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned that the Lord will return to bring justice to those who have been oppressed by the rich, and though poor Christians may have to suffer for a time, they should be patient and wait for the Lord's return when they will be rewarded. We also learned the need to show integrity, be prayerful, and restore an erring brother. Someone might ask the question, "When is it right to use anointing oil for healing the sick?"

There is definitely some dangers associated with anointing with oil to heal the sick, as mentioned in this final chapter of James. The reason for this danger is the tendency for some Christians to think that this is a sure method of offering healing to the sick. However as discussed in the lesson today, we saw how the anointing oil was not just for any particular sickness, or a sure means of healing the sick. The problem mentioned had to do with an individual involved in some sinful behavior that had brought about the chastening of the Lord, and thus some related sickness. The person realizing they were suffering as a consequence of their sin, was to call for the elders and have them pray over him, and anoint him with oil. The prayer of faith is what would bring about the healing, and not the anointing oil, as is clearly stated. Also the fact that the sinner had confessed to the elders his sin, and was asking for healing and forgiveness, brought about a spiritual healing, which was more important than even the physical healing. We must always remember, that our greatest sickness is the sickness within our soul, which is alienated from God due to our sin. Thus our greatest need is the forgiveness for our sins, so we can be restored in relationship to God, and have fellowship with His people. That being said, the anointing with oil may have been a way of expressing faith, or could have also had some medicinal properties. Oil was often used as a medicine to pour into wounds for healing, so it would not have seemed unusual to Christians of the 1st century to make use of oil when seeking the healing of someone who was sick. Anointing oil is therapeutic, so we might simply see this as a practical part of the elders ministering to the brother who was not feeling well.

Today we have churches using healing oil for all kinds of sicknesses, and even selling oil for a profit. This is a perversion of the practice mentioned here in the bible. The application of oil in the healing of a church member, was something that was initiated by the person who was sick, and not something the church was to administer for profit. We must also recognize that God does not intend the immediate healing of every sickness. We can learn this from the scriptures, for God often has a purpose in allowing His children to endure a season of suffering or sickness. We realize that sometimes, sickness is intended to humble a person, or to teach them. Sometimes sickness is simply God's way of calling a Christian home to heaven. Sometimes sickness is a test to prove our faith and make us stronger. Then there are times when sickness is intended to bring glory to God by God's grace shining in the believer even when sick. Sometimes we cannot discern God's particular reason for suffering and sickness. When a child dies in a car accident, or from cancer, we have a difficult time understanding why God would allow this. However we must remember that God does not always owe us an explanation, and He also does not owe us a long and prosperous stay in this world. Every day of life in this world is a gift from God, for which we can be thankful. Even if our days on earth are filled with sorrow and pain, it is still God's gift to grant us life, so that we have the opportunity to know, and trust in Him. Therefore when it comes to seeking healing, we must remember that God will often permit sickness, and does not always intend to heal, at least not at present. So anointing with oil and praying for the healing of the sick, should be administered when it is understood that there is a relationship between the person's sin, and the sickness they are suffering from. We can always ask God to heal someone, but we must be ready to accept if God does not intend for them to be healed in answer to our prayers. The danger is that some Christians have been told that if they just have enough faith, then God will heal them. However, that may discourage them, and their trust in God, when their prayers remain unanswered. Let us not be guilty of trying to invoke healing where God does not intend to heal. We must learn to be content with the condition God has placed us in, and humbly accept sickness as part of a fallen creation, and our sinful condition. It would be wonderful if we could see all diseases healed miraculously through prayer and anointing, but that is not biblically supported, and has been the cause of much discouragement to the faith of those who suffer. Many people in the bible are left with illness and disease, who were godly people, such as the apostle Paul who suffered with eye problems, and Timothy with stomach problems. God did not heal them, for he had purpose in their suffering. Perhaps he also has a purpose for you to be sick or suffer, so don't be angry with God, but thank Him for His grace bestowed in your life.

"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." 2Cor 12:9