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Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Summer

22

Hebrews

What Is the Church?



Bible Study Guide

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Mike L. Wonch

Editor

Judi King

Editor, *Illustrated Bible Life*

Bonnie J. Perry

Director of Editorial

Mark D. Brown

Publisher

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Perspectives

Ignorance Isn't Bliss

You may have heard someone comment, “Ignorance is bliss,” or “The less you know the better off you are,” in regard to a certain situation. But is this true? Some may think that there are times when it is better to be ignorant—lacking in knowledge and understanding. Their thinking is that the less you know, the less you will be negatively impacted. However, the adverse is also true in that the less you know about something, the more of a detrimental impact it could have on your life.

Some approach their faith with an “ignorance is bliss” mentality. That is, they want to know and experience just enough to feel good about their spiritual life, but they don’t want to go deep enough so that their life(style) is effected. The danger of this shallow faith is what Paul alludes to when speaking of believers who are “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). Our relationship with God and our spiritual growth is not a purely mental exercise. However, we are called to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) and to “be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Colossians 1:9).

In the first unit of this quarter, we will dig deep into the theological truths of the book of Hebrews. Angels, death, blood, shadows, and fire! These evocative images all contribute to the book of Hebrews’ case for faith in Jesus Christ. In the second unit, we will look at the church. These sessions will help you gain a deeper understanding of what the church is, why we do what we do, and its mission in the world.

This quarter will help us develop a deeper desire to know more of God, allowing His Holy Spirit to empower us to live Christlike in our world. As Hebrews 6:1 says, “Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God.”

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

June

5

SUCH A GREAT SALVATION

Christ is the ultimate revelation of God and of God's great salvation for us.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
1:1-14**

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

⁵For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?

⁶And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." ⁷In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire."

⁸But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

¹⁰He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

¹¹They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.

¹²You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."

¹³To which of the angels did God ever say, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?

¹⁴Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

2:1-4

KEY VERSE

¹We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ²For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Hebrews 1:1-4

GOD SPEAKS DEFINITIVELY

God revealed himself, His will, and His ways “at many times and in various ways” (see 3:9; 8:9; 11:2, 32). God spoke “through the prophets” “to our ancestors.” But God’s ultimate revelation improved on the fragmentary, diverse, incomplete, and mediated revelations of “long ago” (NRSV). Christ’s coming, death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit demonstrated “the powers of the coming age” (24, 6:5).

God no longer requires intermediaries (see Galatians 3:19-29). God spoke definitively and directly “by his Son,” who “appeared once for all at the end of the age” (9:26). Hebrews does not identify the unique Son by the name “Jesus” until 2:9. These descriptions of Him emphasize His identity as the God-man.

God’s eternal Son is the “heir of all things,” first, because He was God’s agent in creating all that exists (see John 1:2-3; Colossians 1:15-16)—He owns and rules all creation. Second, because He restored to fallen humanity the right-to-rule God had assigned humans in the beginning (Genesis 1:26-28). He lived as God intended humanity to live when He created us.

The fully human Son is also fully God. He does not

Did You Know?

Since the fourth century, all Christians have confessed the Nicene Creed. Its second article depends heavily on Hebrews: "We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human."

**SUPREMELY
THROUGH HIS SON**

merely reflect God's glory, as the moon does the light of the sun. The unique Revealer of God radiates God's glory (see John 1:4). He has "the very character"† of God, and is by nature, innately and essentially God (see John 1:14, 18; 14:7, 9). Unlike prophets and angels, Jesus is not simply God's representative; He is God—our Creator, Sustainer, and Savior.

"By his powerful word," the Son holds creation together and guides it toward God's saving purposes. God did not abandon what He had made. Instead, He entered fallen creation to redeem it, as our Great High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice (Hebrews 4—10), providing purification for sins.

The first half of His saving mission complete (see 9:28), the ascended Son "sat down at the right hand" of God (Psalm 110). As the Royal Heir, seated at the Father's right hand (Hebrews 12:2), the Son fully shares the majestic power of God (see Hebrews 8:1).

The Son, eternally one with God the Father, possesses every divine attribute and prerogative of God. By contrast, angels, like humans, are merely creatures. As their Creator, the Son is "superior to the angels." "Superior" in 1:4 stresses that the Son is better than God's earlier representatives. This is not to denigrate angels, Moses, prophets, or human high priests. It urges hearing and heeding Jesus Christ entirely and exclusively.

Hebrews 1:5-14

These verses provide scriptural support for the author's bold claims in 1:1-4. It begins by citing the words of Psalm 2:7, spoken by the Heavenly Voice at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:7), and fully vindicated by His resurrection (Acts 13:33). Jesus is God's unique and beloved Son. It cites 2 Samuel 7:14 to identify God as the Father of the Messiah. Scripture sometimes refers to angels (Job 1 and 2) or God's people (John 1:12) as God's sons. But Jesus alone is the Son of God in the fullest sense.

Think About It

Superiority is a major theme in Hebrews. In fact, the Greek words for “better” and “superior” occur 15 times throughout the letter. In most cases, these words compare Christ and His work to the key figures of the Old Testament. In addition to angels, Jesus is proclaimed to be greater than the prophets, Moses, Joshua, the human high priests, and old covenant sacrifices.

SO PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION

Verse 6 cites God’s instructions for His angels to worship His risen, ascended, enthroned, and glorified Son. Since God alone is worthy of worship, God the Son is greater than the angels who worship Him.

Verses 7-12 cite several Old Testament passages (Psalm 104:4; 45:6-7; 102:25-37; 8:6; Isaiah 34:4; 51:6), which contrast the contingent, changing, and temporary nature of all created things with the eternal constancy of God the Son. The Creator is clearly superior to His creatures, even spiritual beings like angels. God the Son, the Lord and Master of all created things, is clearly superior to the angels, who serve not only Him, but the humanity He is saving (vv. 13-14; see Psalm 110:1).

Hebrews 2:1-4

First-century Jews believed God gave the law to Moses through angelic mediators (Acts 7:38; Galatians 3:19). God expected His earlier revelations to be taken seriously. He punished those who violated the message revealed through lesser representatives.

Obviously, those privileged to know the message of salvation given directly by God’s Son must “pay the most careful attention” to God’s definitive revelation. It was further validated through the testimony of eyewitnesses and the evidence of the miraculous signs of resurrection and Pentecost.

REFLECT Take time to think about what makes Jesus superior.

GEORGE LYONS is emeritus professor of New Testament at Northwest Nazarene University. He was a General Editor of the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* series and authored or coauthored its volumes on *Romans 1—8*, *Romans 9—16*, *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, and *Philemon*, *John 1—12*, and *John 13—21*.

June
12

CROWNED WITH GLORY AND HONOR

In Christ, God became human and suffered in order to restore humans to His original purposes for them.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
2:5-18**

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶But there is a place where someone has testified: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him?

⁷You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor ⁸and put everything under their feet.”

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. ⁹But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ¹²He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

¹³And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again he says, “Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷**For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in**

KEY VERSE

order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

ENGAGE THE WORD

GOD TURNED JESUS' SHAME TO HONOR

The Genesis account of creation stated that God's intention was for humans to represent Him to the rest of the creatures and exercise dominion over them. But humanity's disobedience marred His image and likeness. And they brought chaos instead of peace in their efforts to rule over creation. Jesus represented God perfectly. God exalted Him as Lord of all. He modeled what God had intended for humanity and made it possible for redeemed humanity to follow His example.

Hebrews 2:5-9

Sin kept humans from fulfilling God's original plan—that humankind should rule the created order (Genesis 1:26-30). God authorized angels to assume this assignment during the old age (Daniel 10:13, 20-21; 12:1). But God never intended angels to rule "the world to come." The new age would be subject to Christ and His church (see Psalm 8:4-6).

Early Christians were convinced that the first coming of Christ inaugurated the kingdom of God. But it would not be consummated until His second coming. God's Son is already Lord. But "at present," He faces "enemies," who challenge His right to rule (Hebrews 1:13; 2:8; 10:13).

God has already resurrected His Son by giving Him an indestructible, glorified body. God exalted the Son to His right hand. But the general resurrection of the dead, last judgment (Hebrews 6:2), final salvation (9:28), and full coming of the kingdom (12:26-28) remain matters of hope—awaited in the future.

Early Christians knew the time between Christ's first and second comings would be marked by suffering and conflict. The defeated forces of the old order would not give up without a fight. "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to" the rightful rulers—Christ and His church (2:8).

In Psalm 8:4, as often in the Old Testament, the terms "mankind" and "son of man" may be synonyms. But "son of man" in Daniel 7:13-14 offers another possibility in Hebrews 2:6. God exalted the lowly and suffering son of man in Daniel 7 to subdue the beastly kingdoms of this world and represent the people of God. The Gospels report that Jesus frequently called

Did You Know?

“The valley of the shadow of death holds no darkness for the child of God. There must be light, else there could be no shadow. Jesus is the light. He has overcome death” (Dwight L. Moody, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 254).

JESUS DIED TO FREE US FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH

himself “son of man.” Facing crucifixion, He predicted that God would vindicate Him as the Son of Man (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 7:56; Philip- pians 2:9; Rev. 1:13). Hebrews uses “son of man” as a title complementing Jesus’ identify as “Son of God.”

The incarnate Son became “lower than the angels” “for a little while.” He temporarily shared the mortality of “flesh and blood” and “suffered death.” In the ancient world, crucifixion was the most shameful death imaginable (1 Corinthians 1:23). Jesus’ sinless life (Hebrews 4:15) shows that His disgraceful death was undeserved. His “death for everyone” expressed “the grace of God” for undeserving sinners. God “crowned [His Son] with glory and honor,” by vindicating His selfless life and death with resurrection and exaltation (2:9).

Hebrews 2:10-16

Human sin and death could not prevent God from fulfilling “the unchanging nature of his purpose” (Hebrews 6:17). The suffering and death of His Son did not deter Him (10:5-10). “It was fitting” that the Creator should also be the Redeemer of fallen creation.

By that means, God’s suffering and dying Son would be “the pioneer of . . . salvation” for all God’s people. God’s purpose was not only to secure human “sal- vation.” By “bringing many sons and daughters to glory,” Christ would enable humans to fulfill, at last, God’s glorious creation-intentions: They would share in His governance of the world (Genesis 1:26-30; see Romans 8:18-30).

The risen Jesus pioneered the way His followers were to live (see Acts 3:15; 5:31). God “crowned” His suffering “with glory and honor.” He raised Christ to reign. By following His lead, regardless of our ethnicity, believers become a part of “the same family” (Hebrews 2:11)—“Abraham’s descendants” (2:16). Like Christ, we suffer and die (10:36). But we will be raised to share in His rule in God’s new creation.

Think About It

The Son of God himself came down in the incarnation. He humbled himself below those angels worshiping in His throne room and became one of us. His perfect obedience to God's will resulted in His exaltation and eternal dominion over all things (vv. 7, 9).

THE SON OF GOD BECAME FULLY HUMAN TO BECOME OUR HIGH PRIEST

Christ's suffering made Him perfectly suited to fulfill His priestly role. His death fulfilled the principle function of Israel's priests—to cleanse and sanctify God's people, making them fit for worship.

"Jesus took on flesh and blood in order to triumph in mortal combat with the devil and deliver people from the fear of death."² The innocent Jesus died in obedience to His Father's will. By saving us, He defeated the devil, "who has the power of death" (see John 8:44).

The slaves the Redeemer set free were "not angels, . . . but Abraham's descendants." Jesus broke the devil's stranglehold on our lives, releasing us mortals from our fear of dying. He "helps" only Abraham's children, not humanity in general. As the Heir of God's promise to Abraham (1:1; 6:11-20), the Son is the Savior. But this is true only of those who share and persevere in the faith of Abraham (see Romans 4; Galatians 2—3).

Hebrews 2:17-18

The author finally announces here the theme that will occupy the balance of his message. Jesus is uniquely able to come alongside us when we are suffering and tempted. Because the incarnate Son of God faced the same human challenges we face, He is more than adequate to help us persevere in our suffering and temptation. We don't have to endure life's difficult circumstances under our own power.

1. See Kevin L. Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition; New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013), 88.

2. Anderson, 94.

REFLECT

In what ways can you give glory and honor to Jesus this week?

GEORGE LYONS

June
19

REST FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Trusting God is the key to finding rest in this world.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
3:12-19**

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. ¹⁵As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

¹⁶Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

4:1-11

¹Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ²For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” ⁵And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

⁶Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and

since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience,⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

KEY VERSE ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹**There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;** ¹⁰for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works just as God did from his. ¹¹Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Hebrews 3:12-19

ONETIME BELIEVERS CAN BE LOST

The audience is invited to not merely to hear author’s words; they needed to “see” (3:12, 19) their situation imaginatively as through the eyes of the unbelieving wilderness generation. Sadly, most of the people of Israel God delivered from slavery in Egypt never entered Canaan. They were lost because they were chronically unreceptive to God’s will and stubbornly resisted God’s directions.

Only in Hebrews 3:12 and 19 do we encounter the word “unbelief”[†] or “unfaithfulness”[†] (*apistia*). This stands in stark contrast to the author’s repeated descriptions of both Jesus and Moses as “faithful” (*pistos*) in 3:1-6. Unbelief is never just a personal issue. Corporate faithfulness requires every one of us to watch out for one another’s spiritual well-being. No one in the community of faith can become self-satisfied and desensitized to the danger of spiritual drift (see 2:1). Instead, all must “encourage one another daily” (3:13).

“You must warn each other every day, . . . so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God” (NLT). We’re all on this Christian pilgrimage together. Inattention may lead to mistrust and eventually rebellion against God. My personal conversion in the past is no guarantee of final salvation. Saving faith entails holding “our original conviction

Did You Know?

H. Orton Wiley believed that the “rest of faith” refers, first, “in this life” to the “state of purity and holiness in the lives of true believers.” Entire sanctification is “a personal, spiritual rest of the soul in God, . . . a second definite crisis in the lives of true believers.” It refers, second, “in the life to come [to] a perfect rest from all the consequences of sin: ignorance, infirmities, sickness, suffering, and death.”²

FUTURE REST

firmly to the very end” (3:14). “Consistent mutual accountability is necessary to minimize the danger of apostasy.”¹ The failure of any one threatens the entire community (see 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:15-17).

The potential for the loss of final salvation was real. The author reminded the audience: The Israelites “who heard and rebelled” were among those Moses led out of Egypt. They “perished” in the wilderness “because” their sin and disobedience demonstrated “their unbelief.” In 3:19, the author reemphasized the warning that was issued in 3:12. The faith that brings final salvation is not momentary mental ascent. It is a lifetime of faithfulness to God.

Hebrews 4:1-11

The obvious theme of this section of the author’s message is the “rest” available to the faithful people of God. He opened and closed it with another (see 3:12) forceful appeal. His hearers needed to make sure that no one in the community missed God’s promised rest. The opportunity to experience it was available only to those who remained faithful to God (4:1-3) and who refused the path of “disobedience” (Hebrews 4:6 and 11).

The promise of “rest” for God’s people is characterized as “good news.” The word “promise” appears 14 times in Hebrews, more than in any other New Testament book. God’s promise is conditional: Trusting and obeying God are essential prerequisites for entering into His salvation-rest (see 10:38-39). Hearing the promise “was of no value” to those who did not actually listen. “We who have believed enter” God’s rest, while most of those who heard the original invitation forfeited the promised rest.

Like other nearly contemporary Jewish and Christian writers both inside and outside the biblical canon, the author assumed that Sabbath-rest symbolized end-times salvation: Rest refers to the heavenly Jerusalem, the resurrection, and eternal life of the world

Think About It

The most famous prayer in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* asserts: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Charles Wesley's hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," prays, "Let us all in Thee inherit, Let us find that second rest." We must seriously consider Kevin Anderson's thought-provoking question: "How is the promise of rest in the future connected with the life of faith, obedience, and holiness now?"³

to come (see 2:5; 6:5; 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; 11:16; 12:22; 13:14). But the author repeatedly emphasized the present availability of this future promise ("still stands" [4:1], "still remains" [4:6], "remains" [4:9]). Although its consummation awaits the end-times, believers are already in the process of entering God's rest.

The younger generation of Israel's ancestors eventually entered the promised land of Canaan. But this historical moment could never have adequately fulfilled God's promise, or "God would not have spoken later about another day" (4:8). The author referred to the inspired words of "David," written centuries after the exodus, and "a long time later" (4:7) than the seventh day of creation.

The opportunity to enter God's rest cannot refer only to the distant past, but refers also to "Today" (4:7). The author supported his claim that the availability of rest has existed since "the creation of the world" (4:3), by quoting Genesis 2:2 ("somewhere" in 4:4) and Psalm 95:11—the only two Old Testament passages that refer to God's personal rest.

1. Kevin L. Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition; New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013), 123.
2. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised by Morris A. Weigelt (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City: Kansas City, Missouri, 1984), online at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyctr/books/3201-3300/HDM3275.pdf>. Accessed January 7, 2021.
3. Anderson, 151.

REFLECT

In what ways can you experience God's rest today?

GEORGE LYONS

June
26

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST, JESUS

Jesus is our Great High Priest who offers the sufficient sacrifice to enable us to come to God.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
4:14-16**

KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

5:1-10

¹Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.”

⁶And he says in another place, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal

salvation for all who obey him¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Finally, the author has reached “the main point” (8:1) of his message: “Jesus the Son of God” (4:14) was more than qualified to be our Great High Priest (4:14—10:18; see 2:17; 3:1).

OVERLY QUALIFIED

Hebrews 4:14-16

The risen Christ’s divine appointment to be High Priest was demonstrated when God exalted Him into His immediate presence: “We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens.” Christ’s supra-heavenly (7:26) high priesthood was essential. “If he were on earth, he would not be a priest” of the ordinary kind, much less a high priest (8:4). He was not a descendant of Aaron (5:4). Nevertheless, Christ’s full humanity (see 2:9, 14, 17-18; 5:7-9) guaranteed His solidarity with the humans God appointed Him to serve: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

Christ’s heavenly exaltation and His refusal to yield to ordinary human temptations to sin did not render Him unable to sympathize with our human condition. On the contrary, His full identification with mortality and His experience of God’s victory over death more than qualified Him to be the Greatest High Priest.

The author was well aware of the difficult struggles his audience had faced (10:32-34). But he could assure them that their victorious Great High Priest had faced even greater challenges. They had “not yet resisted to the point” of death, as He had (12:4). More importantly, His resurrection demonstrated that He was “able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (7:25). As a “priest forever” (5:6), Christ required no successors.

Did You Know?

Hebrews 9:13 says, “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.” Jesus, being perfect, died, rose victorious, and ascended into heaven, showing that His life, sacrifice, and priesthood were all effective for cleansing us internally of our sin.

IN THE ORDER OF AARON

IN THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

The author explained the reasons for his two exhortations with appropriate caution. Avoiding direct commands, he typically employed exhortations instead (12 times). Such guidance usually begins in English with “let us.” By this means the author placed himself equally under the authority of God’s Word. He did not demand—“You must!” but encouraged, “We must.” On this basis, the author could exhort his audience, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (4:14). The author closed with his second exhortation: “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:16).

Hebrews 5:1-4

Israel’s high priest represented God to the people he served, and people to God, by offering in their behalf “gifts and sacrifices for sins” (5:1; see 8:3; 9:9). Beyond his descent from the divinely called Aaron (5:4), his chief qualification was his human weakness. This enabled him “to deal gently with” his ignorantly straying people. But his own failures obliged him repeatedly “to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people” (5:3; see 7:27-28; 9:7; 10:10-12).

Hebrews 5:5-10

Aaron and the high priests who descended from him did not choose their honored office; God called them (5:4-5). Appealing to Psalm 2:7 and 110:4, the author insisted that in the same way, Christ did not choose the honors God bestowed on Him—to be the Messiah, the “Son” of God (see 1:5), and to be a perpetual priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (5:6, 10).

The author delayed his more complete discussion of the similarity between Christ and Melchizedek until chapter 7. In 5:7-10, he briefly characterized Christ’s messianic ministry “during the days of Jesus’ life on earth”—that is, the historical period between Christ’s

Think About It

"Jesus' victory over sin and death, crowning with glory and honor, and inheritance of all things achieves the destiny intended for humanity. Jesus' likeness with humanity excludes sin (4:15; see Romans 8:3 . . .), because sin is the very weakening and dehumanizing force he came to destroy. His salvation of human beings consists of his 'bringing many [children] to glory' (2:10), that is, restoring human beings to their divine destiny."¹

eternal preexistence and His ascension. The exalted Christ did not abandon His humanity or bodily existence when He resumed His heavenly status.

Of all the events of Christ's earthly life, the author focused on His agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus prayed that, if possible, the Father would spare Him from the shameful death on the cross that awaited Him. "His reverent submission" encapsulates His concession, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus' crucifixion the next afternoon seems to make nonsense of the assertion that His prayer "was heard"—"answered"[†] (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus died. But vindication came three days later, in the resurrection.

The Greek wordplay in the expression, "he learned [*emathen*] . . . from what he suffered [*epathen*]," was as common as our "no pain, no gain." But the author's remarkable claim that the earthly Jesus "learned obedience" (5:8) has far-reaching implications. By learning obedience, the author did not suggest that Jesus had to repent of past disobedience. His point was, rather, that His willing acceptance of suffering, abuse, shame, and death demonstrated His unswerving faithfulness and obedience to God. Jesus proved to be the exemplary opposite of the unfaithful, disobedient wilderness generation of Israel (3:12—4:11).

The obedience of the Son of God was fully vindicated and "made perfect" through His resurrection from the dead. "The power of an indestructible life" (7:16) enabled Him to become "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:9).

1. Kevin L. Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition; New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013), 174.

REFLECT

Take time to think about what it means for Jesus to be our Great High Priest.

GEORGE LYONS

July

3

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Christian maturity is about moving beyond the basics of our new life in Christ to the expansive truths of transformation and development in Christlikeness.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
5:11-14**

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

6:1-12

KEY VERSES

¹Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ²instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And God permitting, we will do so.

⁴It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ⁷Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

⁹Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. ¹⁰God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. ¹²We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

ENGAGE THE WORD

We might find ourselves challenged to understand the points the author makes about Jesus in the book of Hebrews. However, the basic message is clear: God has revealed the sole means to salvation in the suffering and death of His son, Jesus Christ. As basic as this truth is, the author's readers find even this teaching hard primarily because they have stopped growing in their faith.

BELIEVERS WITH A HEARING PROBLEM

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

Central to the author's overall argument is his teaching that Jesus is our sinless high priest and that through His suffering death believers have salvation (4:14–10:25). But before he completes his very first point in this section, he must pause a moment to address his readers directly. The author does so because he is concerned that his readers are not yet ready to hear what he has to say. Why is that? In verse 11, he claims that his readers are "lazy" (CSB) and "dull of hearing" (ESV). In fact, it appears that they "no longer even try to understand" what he is teaching (NIV). How could it be that these believers were no longer responding to the truths (5:11) that the author of Hebrews is trying to teach them?

The reason why they fail to hear and understand is fairly simple. Their growth in the faith is stunted. For too long, they had experienced no significant growth in their spiritual lives. In fact, the author would say that they have experienced no growth whatsoever.

Did You Know?

Many early Christian interpreters temper this teaching on sin in Hebrews. The Shepherd of Hermes and church fathers like Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom argued God would still forgive believers who sinned after baptism. God is always ready to restore those who seek forgiveness.

WARNING AGAINST FALLING AWAY

Instead, they are stuck as babes in Christ living on the “elementary truths” of the faith (5:12-13). Although they should be mature teachers who provide solid spiritual food to others, they were, instead, infants unable to hear the hard truths that he was about to give them. As sad as this is, more concerning to him is that their stunted growth has made it difficult for them to “distinguish good from evil” (5:14). For the author, there is only one path forward for his readers and for those of us who are also stunted in our own growth. We must move forward toward maturity (6:1-2). Whatever is holding us back needs to be let go so that we can hear the truth and then live it out. The good news is that God can help all of us to do just that (6:3).

Hebrews 6:4-8

Though it is embarrassing that any of his readers are still babes in the faith, the biggest concern for the author is that his readers may ultimately fall away from the faith. No believer can stay a babe in the faith forever. Believers either are growing in the faith or they are dying. And what happens should someone’s faith ultimately die? The author has very harsh words for those who completely fall away from the faith, a state typically referred to as apostasy. As he writes, “it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened . . . and who have fallen away to be brought back to repentance” (6:4-6). The author cannot imagine how believers who have come to believe and who have participated in the full salvation found in Jesus will find their way back to faith. Why is that the case? For the author of Hebrews, those who would do so would be responsible “for crucifying the Son of God all over again” (6:6).

While these words are hard to hear and do need to be heard alongside other New Testament teachings on forgiveness (e.g., Colossians 2:13; 1 John 1:9), the basic truth here remains. The blessings that God bestows upon believers (i.e., rain, 6:7) are designed to

Think About It

Our hope for a better future is not based on who we are, but on who His is. Hope is not the unrealized dream of finite humanity, but is the gracious gift of the sovereign God.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO HIS PROMISES

help believers grow in the faith and to reap fruit that is a blessing to others. However, those who use those same blessings from God to grow thorns and thistles, which are of no use to anyone, will find themselves under God's judgment (i.e., be cursed and ultimately burned, 6:8). The author's hope is that this warning will be sufficient to help those stunted in their growth to finally grow up to the level of maturity to which God has called them.

Hebrews 6:9-12

Although we may not be counted on to always hear as God would want us to hear, we can all count on God to be faithful to His promises to us. And though the author of Hebrews is rightfully concerned about his hearers, he is still convinced that they have not yet completely fallen away (6:9). However, they, as do we, must do more than hear and believe to lay claim to God's promises. Instead, we must go beyond hearing and believing to acting upon what we hear and believe. We all must show "diligence to the very end" (6:11) and to "imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what is promised" (6:12). Examples for us to imitate are provided throughout chapter 11. May we all hear this call to grow up to maturity in the faith and actively follow those who have persevered to the end.

REFLECT

In what ways is God calling you to grow today? What is holding you back? What promises can you claim to help you press forward toward maturity in the faith?

WILLIAM H. MALAS JR is professor of biblical literature at Eastern Nazarene College, Quincy, MA.

July
10

A SACRIFICE ONCE FOR ALL

Christ's sacrificial death on the cross has provided atonement for all humankind once and for all time.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
10:1-18**

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ²Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. ⁷Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.’”

⁸First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”—though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰**And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.**

¹¹Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

KEY VERSE

¹⁵The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

¹⁶“This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

¹⁷Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.”

¹⁸And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Hard teachings are always challenging to fully understand. So, the author of Hebrews has already warned us that we needed to pay close attention to his argument about Jesus and His role as our Superior High Priest (5:11). That topic began back in 4:14 and now concludes with today's passage. The good news is that though the overall argument may be hard to understand, the key points that the author of Hebrews wants to make are summarized well in these verses. Let's unpack what he has to say.

THE LIMITS OF UNENDING SACRIFICES

Hebrews 10:1-4

Throughout his argument, the author of Hebrews has pointed out the limits of the Jewish sacrificial system as outlined in the Old Testament (see 9:1-10). For him, the whole system is a “shadow of the good things that are coming” in Jesus because it does not fully atone for our sins. Atonement is the process by which God forgives the guilt of our sins and restores us to right relationship with Him. In these verses, the author of Hebrews provides reasons why the sacrificial system does not provide for us the forgiveness that we desperately need.

One reason why this is true owes to the fact that the same sacrifices as outlined in the Old Testament must be made year after year so that there is no end to them, which means there is no end to the need to atone for our sins. Thus, for the author, this continual need for sacrifice does not really offer believers true

Did You Know?

The author of Hebrews cites specific passages from the Old Testament 35 times. Often the author provides Christian commentary on these passages, utilizing a Jewish form of interpretation called midrash.

THE SACRIFICE OF ONE WHO WAS COMPLETELY OBEDIENT

forgiveness and certainly does not provide believers a clear conscience (the NIV talks about feeling “guilty for sins,” 10:2). Instead, the annual sacrifices actually become an “annual reminder of sins” (10:3). For the author, the logical conclusion is then that animal blood sacrifice is insufficient to bring the kind of salvation that God has promised. True and final atonement should result in our sins being completely forgiven and our consciences being cleansed (10:2; see also 9:14; 10:22). So, if animal sacrifices are not sufficient to fully atone for our sins, what can?

Hebrews 10:5-14

Throughout the Old Testament, there has been a critique of those who overly emphasize rituals and sacrifices over total obedience to God (1 Samuel 15:22; Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 1:12-17). According to this critique, most pleasing to God is a life of obedience that pursues God’s justice for His people. The author of Hebrews finds this same kind of critique in Psalm 40:6-8, especially in verses 6-7. After citing all three of these verses from Psalm 40 (10:5-7), the author first notes that the psalm states that God can be displeased with sacrifices offered in His name even when priests are fulfilling what is required by the law (10:8). So, who, then, can offer a sacrifice that will always be pleasing to God? As Psalm 40:8 states, the only one who could offer such a sacrifice is one who has “come to do your will” and has done it. Jesus is the only one who was completely obedient to God in life and then offered up His own body as a holy sacrifice by dying on the cross (10:9-10; 12:2). Because Jesus made this kind of sacrifice, the author can say that Jesus has done it “once for all” (see also 9:23-28).

To cement this truth in place for the readers, the author of Hebrews contrasts Jesus’ role as priest to all those priests that have come before. All other priests offered sacrifices daily and did the same sacrifices over and over again. Not only that, these priests did

Think About It

Jesus' complete humanity, perfect obedience, and infinite deity came together and provided a sacrifice so effective that it sanctified us—made us holy and able to enter into God's presence—“once for all” (v. 10).

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR US?

their sacrifices while standing (10:11). In contrast, Jesus as priest offered “for all time one sacrifice for sins, and then sat down at the right hand of God.” Through the one sacrifice of His own body as He died on the cross, Jesus has not only made atonement for all of our sins, but has made us holy so that we can abide in God's presence (10:14).

Hebrews 10:15-18

In these verses, the author's argument comes full circle. God had already stated to Jeremiah that He was going to do a new thing and establish a new covenant with His people (10:15; see also 8:7-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34). This new covenant was necessary because all that had come before was just an outline or shadow (10:1) of “the good things that are now already here” in Jesus (9:6). This new covenant has begun with Jesus' coming as a priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28).

In addition, Jesus as the Great High Priest offered His own body as an obedient sacrifice on the cross to atone for our sins (9:11-28). And so, because of His faithful obedience, we now can experience the kind of atonement that God always intended. Our sins are truly forgiven, and our consciences are cleansed because God will remember our sins no more (10:17-18). With Jesus' atonement, no further sacrifice for sin is necessary. Praise be to God.

REFLECT

What comfort do you find in knowing that your sins are forgiven and forgotten by God? How important is it to you to have a clear conscience and not feel guilty for past sins?

WILLIAM MALAS

July
17

UNSWERVING HOPE

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a gift that transforms our lives and empowers us to live with freedom and confidence before the throne of God.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
10:19-39**

KEY VERSE

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.²³**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.**²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,²⁵not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

²⁶If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,²⁷but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.²⁸Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.²⁹How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?³⁰For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”³¹It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³²Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.³³Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times

you stood side by side with those who were so treated.³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.³⁷ For, “In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”

³⁸ And, “But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.”

³⁹ But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Have you ever been tempted to quit something before you reached your goal? Perhaps the effort needed to finish was just not worth it or the sacrifices that you thought you needed to make were too great. What happens if that same temptation appears in our Christian lives? For the author of Hebrews, this temptation was precisely what was plaguing his congregation. They started out strong, committed, joyous in suffering, but now, they were in danger of abandoning it all.

In this section, the author becomes very passionate as he urges his readers to stay the course and not miss out on all of the blessings of the Christian life, both now and when Christ returns.

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND EACH OTHER

Hebrews 10:19-25

The author of Hebrews would not have written this hard teaching about Jesus' role as our Great High Priest (4:14-10:18) unless it meant something very important for us as Christians. And for the author, there was nothing more important than the ability to “enter the most Holy Place and to draw near to God” (10:19-21). As he has argued throughout this section, this intimate fellowship with God is made possible because of Jesus' obedient sacrifice (i.e., His blood and

Did You Know?

The “Day” is shorthand for the future “Day of the Lord” when God will both deliver His people and judge those who oppose Him (1 Corinthians 3:13; Amos 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1:7-18; Joel 1:5; 2:31).

His body, 10:19-20) as well as His important role as the Great Priest (10:21).

An important blessing that flows from this fellowship is a cleansed conscience (10:22) and the ability to be in close fellowship with one another as believers (10:24-25). Unfortunately, his readers were in danger of losing all these things. This is why the author exhorts his readers to “draw near to God,” to “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” and to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Jesus’ sacrifice would be in vain if His followers did not remain faithful until the very end (i.e., the “Day” that is approaching; 10:25).

A LIFE WITHOUT SIN

Hebrews 10:26-31

Another blessing available to believers who remain faithful is a life without sin. The author of Hebrews firmly maintains that believers have the power to cease from deliberate sin (10:19). Before exploring further how the author states this truth, it is worth reflecting a moment on how great a blessing this truly is. Not only can we have a clear conscience, but as believers, we have the potential to live lives that can keep us from being trapped in a guilty conscience again.

We do not celebrate this blessing enough. Of course, the language that the author uses here are words of warning more than celebration because of the dire situation. Thus, he starts out by being careful to state the negative consequences should believers decide not to turn their backs on any sin in their lives. The reality is that God will judge, and a “raging fire” will “consume” His enemies (10:27). And if Deuteronomy 17:2-7 calls for the death penalty for anyone who leads the people astray from God, how much more severe will be the penalty if believers fall away from the Christian faith (10:28-30)? So, those who have a guilty conscience before God will certainly find it to be a “dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Though all this is true, the good news remains.

Think About It

It is important to remember the confidence and joy one experiences as a new believer is an aid to staying on track in the face of persecution and suffering for the gospel. Recalling God's faithfulness in the past provides the perspective necessary for our sustained faithfulness.

REMEMBERING OUR EARLY DAYS IN THE FAITH

Fear need not characterize our lives. Instead, we can remain faithful to the end and so "draw near to God" with confidence and with a cleansed conscience. And if we are willing, we can leave behind a life filled with deliberate sin.

Hebrews 10:32-39

So how do we remain faithful to the end? The author of Hebrews suggests that we "remember those early days" when we first started our life in Christ. For his readers, it was a time of immense suffering and sacrifice. They were "publicly exposed to insult and persecution" and even stood with others who were persecuted as well (10:33). They even joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property (10:34). Because of this past faithfulness, the author urged them to remember what they had given up when they first became believers. By doing so, he hoped that they would not shrink back and be destroyed. Thus, one key to keeping the faith is to remember and celebrate these joyous times when we showed ourselves to be faithful in hopes that they will inspire us to continue doing so even now. And those who remember and remain faithful to the end can claim this word of encouragement: the faithful will "receive what he has promised" and "so are saved."

REFLECT

Do you believe that you can live a life in which you do not deliberately keep sinning? What helps you to keep going when you are tempted to fall away from your commitments?

WILLIAM MALAS

July
24

RUNNING WITH ENDURANCE

God provides everything necessary for believers to run the race of life and endure to the end.

THE WORD

**HEBREWS
12:1-17**

KEY VERSES

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.
¹³“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

¹⁴Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Hebrews 12:1-3

RUNNING THE RACE OF LIFE

Perhaps one of the most memorable images in the book of Hebrews is this image of the Christian life. Each believer is depicted as an athletic runner in a great foot race. The crowds (i.e., “the great cloud of witnesses,” 12:1) are those who have gone before and successfully run the same race. They have already been faithful to live out what was required of them. Now it is the readers turn.

The author provides some important advice on how to run this race well. First, believers must “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” To run as fast and as effectively as possible, runners typically remove any excess clothing. For the Christian life, the author appeals once again to his readers to let go of their temptations to fall away from the faith which will ultimately lead to them dropping out of the race altogether (5:11—6:12; 10:19-39). Instead, they need to persevere in the race (12:1) and to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus (12:2).

Jesus is the one who “endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Because He is the “pioneer and perfecter of faith,” believers need to follow Jesus’ example as they faithfully live out the Christian life. Unfortunately, to do so, this often means experiencing, like

Did You Know?

Stories about Esau are in Genesis, including the forsaking of his birthright (25:27-34). Over time, Esau and his descendants came to embody not just impropriety, but also rebellion against God (Jeremiah 49:8, 10; Obadiah 1-21; Malachi 1:2-3).

SUFFERING IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Jesus, suffering and the rejection of others (i.e., scorn). But as so many others have done before, all of us can do these things without growing weary or losing heart (12:3).

Hebrews 12:4-11

All would likely pursue the Christian life if it was an easy straight path that we can run whenever it suited us to do so. Unfortunately, it never is that way. While running this race may be hard, fortunately, for the author's readers, their struggles had not yet reached the point that they had shed their own blood (12:4). Some who have run the race certainly had shed their own blood as the list of the faithful from chapter 11 makes clear. Still, it is certain that the author's readers had suffered, and it was looking like they would need to suffer some more.

To help his readers cope with their suffering, the author of Hebrews offers a different perspective on suffering. Though suffering is never pleasant, is rarely desired, and is often painful, it never is a sign that God has abandoned His people. Instead, the author argues, believers who suffer are experiencing God's discipline (12:7). In essence, like good parents who discipline their children out of love (12:9-10), God uses situations which we would classify as suffering to transform those situations and ourselves into something where His purposes are accomplished. While not mentioned here, Jesus' suffering is the best example of this (12:2). To be sure, God does not cause these sufferings, but neither does He simply make them go away. Instead, God utilizes suffering to train up believers in ways that are "for our good, in order that we might share in his holiness" (12:10). So, from the author's perspective, when we endure suffering, we should not focus on the negative aspects of it. Instead, we can adopt a different perspective that remembers that suffering can produce in us "a harvest of righteousness and peace" (12:11). In sum, this alternative

Think About It

"How can suffering make us more holy? It cannot, directly. It does so only indirectly, as we let God's grace sanctify the suffering and thus use it to deepen our understanding, enlarge our sympathies, strengthen our faith, stabilize our purpose, spiritualize our perspectives, sweeten and mellow our attitudes, and thus make us in character and personality more Christlike" (Richard S. Taylor, *Beacon Bible Commentary*, Vol. X [Kansas City, MO: 1967], 161).

view of suffering is presented as a "word of encouragement" (12:5). For when we suffer, we can trust that God will come alongside and help strengthen our faith so that we might endure to the end and grow up in Christian character (for Paul's similar perspective on suffering, see Romans 5:1-4).

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Hebrews 12:12-17

Training for the race does not end with God's discipline through suffering. By enduring hardship, believers strengthen themselves, make paths level for those who are struggling (i.e., "lame"), and in the end all find healing (12:12-13). Moving away from the athletic metaphor, the author encourages his readers "to live in peace with everyone and to be holy" (12:14). As was emphasized in other places, the race is not run alone. Believers need to keep gathering together to encourage each other (10:25) and to love and honor each other (13:1). They need to honor their marriage commitments (12:16; 13:4). And, ultimately, persevere to the end, seeing that "no one falls short of the grace of God" (12:15). Others in the past did fall short, including Esau (12:16); but with God's help we can endure to the end and so "not grow weary," nor "lose heart" (12:3).

REFLECT

How has God come alongside you amid your past trials and sufferings? If you are not experiencing suffering now, who could you come alongside to help encourage them amid their suffering?

WILLIAM MALAS

July
31

THE BODY OF CHRIST

The body of Christ on earth is composed of believers who live life together as the community of faith.

THE WORD

ACTS 2:42-47

KEY VERSE

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

EPHESIANS
4:1-16

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism;⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.⁸This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."

⁹(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?¹⁰He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,¹²to equip his people for works

of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PRACTICING KINGDOM LIFE TOGETHER

Acts 2:42-47

The early believers, followers of Jesus, practiced their discipleship together, gathering for worship and practicing life together. This was a defining priority to which they “devoted” themselves. It was in their gathering that they became the church, a means of grace that God could use to change the world.

The beginning point of their worship—and life—was the apostles’ teaching, the accounts that faithfully taught what Jesus taught. What was important was not that these words came from the apostles, but that they reliably conveyed the teachings of Jesus and the “Way” of following Him. For us, the Bible serves that function, providing us with a reliable guide on the “Way.” God’s people must continually “calibrate” our thinking and living to the guidance of the Word. This requires a persistent and deliberate attention to the study of the Word. While contemporary topics matter to our application of kingdom life practices to our patterns of living, the Word remains our central guide and touchstone.

The early church also valued fellowship and dedicated themselves to the practice of life together. Of course, this was more than an active social calendar. This was fellowship, not for the primary purpose of entertainment, but to build relationships and community that reflected the life and values of the kingdom.

Did You Know?

For more than two centuries after Pentecost church congregations met primarily in homes. Dedicated church buildings only begin to appear in the 3rd century. This means that in this dynamic period of the early church and the rapid expansion of the faith, Christians did not have church facilities. Meeting in homes must have emphasized the family character of being in Christian community. Perhaps there is something to be learned from those early Christians.

THE FRUIT OF LIFE TOGETHER

They had to learn how to live together—rich and poor, Jew and gentile, the educated and the illiterate. This doesn't happen easily, or normally! We might value and appreciate other social, racial, or cultural communities from a distance but not tackle the challenges of life together. Of course, this is hard work. But for the early church it was essential work for Jesus' disciples.

This shared kingdom life included sharing economic resources and table fellowship. These are the most challenging areas of life to share. We are much more likely to offer sympathy than access to our checkbooks. But that changes somehow when we're speaking about our family. I love them and want to bless them. And when we devote ourselves to kingdom life together something similar happens. The welfare of my brothers and sisters in Christ becomes more important, even urgent, for me. My resources become available in a surprising way.

The practice of meal fellowship (breaking of bread) practices this community building. We don't just drop food off at a food pantry or send a meal. We gather around the table together. As God's people, our table fellowship gathers the outsider and stranger into this family practice—making them family members, too.

Ephesians 4:1-16

In this brief address Paul outlines key features of the kingdom life that results from faithful pursuit of the life of Christ—to lead a life worthy of our calling and the One who calls us. It begins with unity. When our understanding of life and of ourselves is grounded in Christ we discover that we are, essentially, one. This does not mean that we cease to have different personalities or personal qualities. It means that, deeper than those qualities, deeper than our cultural, social, economic, racial characteristics, or identity, we are most deeply grounded together in Christ. Everything else falls away before this central, defining reality. We are one in Christ.

Think About It

Paul urges believers to live a life that is worthy of their calling. Our actions should measure up to what we believe.

This makes it natural, then, for us to understand that our gifts (of every kind) are given for the sake of the body of Christ. God's gifts are never given simply for personal benefit or aggrandizement. We are recipients—and conduits—of grace. Rather than a burden or obligation, this is a natural outflow of life together.

The healthy result is the upbuilding of the community, the body. The life of the kingdom in community moves naturally toward the healing and maturation of the members of the community. We grow up together in, and to, Christ. We become a community that increasingly reflects the life and character of the One we follow and serve. His character is increasingly reflected in the way we live together. This maturation not only properly honors and reflects Christ; it produces growth and health in the members of the community. We become the persons we were created to be. We live together as we are designed and meant to live. Our culture values the individual—our freedom, autonomy, and identity. But Scripture shows us that God invites us into an experience of blessing and growth that is only possible when we share it together.

REFLECT

How important is the church as community? What kind of role did the church play in your journey to faith? Living as a disciple since then? Is the church—as the community of the kingdom—just an elective tool, or is it an important part of our life of faith?

CARL LETH is professor of theology emeritus at Olivet Nazarene University and former Dean of the School of Theology & Christian Ministry. He continues to write, teach, and preach actively, and heads New Creation, Inc., a Christian service non-profit.

THE SACRAMENTS

August

7

We receive grace from God when He brings us into the body of Christ through baptism and when He feeds us spiritually through the Lord's Supper.

THE WORD

COLOSSIANS 2:9-15

KEY VERSE

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.¹¹ In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,¹² **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.**

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-22

KEY VERSE

¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ **Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?** ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?¹⁹ Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything?²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and

the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.²²Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

ENGAGE THE WORD

We are gathered together on a journey—long, demanding, and often perilous. But God has provided means of His grace to help us on our way—all the way home.

BAPTISM

Colossians 2:9-15

The Christian life is a journey made on purpose. God enables the journey through Jesus Christ and pursues us to join Him on the way. Apart from His grace to enable and to call us we would never move from where we were. Baptism is the sacrament that declares we have joined the journey and the people who are making it together. It is the sacrament of initiation. It is a sign of radical reorientation of life, a changed direction and purpose.

In today's text, Paul uses the imagery of death and life. The baptized are described as having been buried, then raised to new life in Christ. It is hard to imagine a more definite image of death than burial. It has a stark finality to it. Someone who has been buried is certainly dead. This makes the image of being raised—resurrected—all the more powerful. We really die to sin and this world, and we are raised in the power of Christ to a new and different life. Immersion portrays this powerful imagery of baptism. While we may also be baptized by sprinkling and pouring, the popularity of baptism by immersion is rooted in this powerful imagery.

Coming to new life in Christ we are blessed by all the benefits of His death and resurrection. Forgiveness, cleansing, and freedom are benefits made available to us through Jesus. Baptism (and the new life it signifies) is not only about what we leave behind, it is about who we are in Christ and where we are going.

Did You Know?

In the early church new disciples were baptized after an intentional and rigorous process of teaching and spiritual practice. Worship services were divided into public and private sections. New believers, disciples under discipline, and seekers could participate in the service through the preaching. But they would all be dismissed before the congregation celebrated the Lord's Supper. Typically, baptism (after completion of the process of preparation) would take place early on Easter morning. After their baptism they would process into the worship service and, for the first time, see and participate in the Lord's Supper.

We are new people, headed in a new direction. Baptism also identifies us with God's people, the church. Where Christians go, we go together—we are a people in Christ.

Baptism signifies this radical change of life, but does not cause it. While God can choose to move and act at any time, He is not bound to the performance of the sacrament of baptism. The water has no inherent power. There is no magical effect. The power of the water of baptism is as a sign, a pointer that directs our vision and expectation to God's work, to which we give testimony. This means that we should not regard baptism as having essential power. But we should honor the sacrament of baptism as the sign Christ has instituted to faithfully celebrate the transformation of life that is God's gracious gift to us.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

I Corinthians 10:14-22

Starting a journey and moving in a new direction does not guarantee that we will arrive, especially if the journey is a long and, sometimes, arduous one. We need continuing direction and sustenance along the way. The sacrament of communion is God's provision for our journey. While baptism is a one-time event, the Lord's Supper is a recurring meal and resource for us.

Reenacting the sacrament of the Lord's Supper reminds us who we are, how we have come to this place, where we are headed, who we travel with, and where we look for grace and strength to continue the journey. Remembering is an important aspect of the Lord's Supper. That is, we don't just remember Jesus' sacrifice, but we are reminded what that sacrifice means for us. We celebrate communion regularly so that we will be frequently reminded, countering the world's persistent effort to turn us in other directions, to embrace other identities.

The act of eating in the sacrament points to our

Think About It

An important aspect of baptism is how it redefines our identity in relation to the community of disciples. Through baptism we declare/affirm our identity with God's people as part of our radical commitment to Christ. For many disciples this identification came at the expense of other human relationships. Identification with God's family cost them their relationship with biological family. This is still true in many places and cultures today. To truly follow Christ and become part of His family is a profound and impactful decision and commitment.

feeding on the grace of Christ, provided to us through the cross. We are spiritually nourished, renewed and strengthened, as we receive the signs of the body and blood of Christ. While the signs, themselves, are pretty meager—small portions of bread and drink—yet they signify a meal that is rich and abundant, a feast! God's grace, in Christ, fills us to overflowing.

As in baptism, there is no magic in the elements or the rite we celebrate. God is not present in the sacrament like the legendary Genie in a bottle. We cannot make Him appear by some special action. But we don't need to! He chooses to be present. He chooses to give grace. We can be confident that whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper Christ is, in fact, present. Being present with us is where He longs to be.

MEANS OF GRACE

The sacraments and their frequent celebration are very important. They guide us, aligning our identity and values with the kingdom, preventing and correcting the drift that the world around us tries so hard to effect on the people of God. They also serve to "feed" us. They are the sacramental means God has chosen for His grace to enrich and bless us.

REFLECT

Take time to think about the importance and meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

CARL LETH

August
14

COME AND WORSHIP

God is worthy of our continual praise all day, every day.

THE WORD

**PSALM
96:1-13**

Sing to the **LORD** a new song; sing to the **LORD**, all the earth.
 ²Sing to the **LORD**, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

³Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

⁴For great is the **LORD** and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

⁵For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the **LORD** made the heavens.

⁶Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

⁷Ascribe to the **LORD**, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

KEY VERSES ⁸Ascribe to the **LORD** the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.

⁹Worship the **LORD** in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

¹⁰Say among the nations, “The **LORD** reigns.” The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

¹¹Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

¹²Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

¹³Let all creation rejoice before the **LORD**, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

PSALM 117:1-2

¹Praise the **Lord**, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.
²For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the **Lord** endures forever.
 Praise the **Lord**.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Our focus today is a call to worship. We often hear the act of worship linked to singing. “Now, let’s worship!” the worship leader calls out as we go into the singing part of the service. But while music and singing are clearly linked to worship, the kind of worship God calls us to is much more than musical expression and should be the focus of our service before, during, and after we sing. Worship is also about more than an experience, though true worship will prompt profound personal experience for us. True worship emerges from a changed life, and the experience of God’s redeeming and transforming work in our lives which goes far deeper than how we feel. And it is more than an individual act. It happens most fully in community where God’s people experience and declare His presence and work in thanksgiving and witness to the world. So, let’s worship! Two psalms of worship will help us.

A CALL TO SING

Psalm 96:1-2

“Sing!” the psalmist says, not because you have a pleasing singing voice, but because you have a compelling motivation. Sing “a new song.” It is not new because it has been recently written, but because it witnesses to the work of God in our lives that enables us to sing a different “song” through His salvation! Once our songs were locked in a minor key, full of discord, but now He has made them into songs of joy and hope. He has given us a new song and new life. How can we not respond by singing? Our singing—our worship—emerges from our experience of God’s salvation “day after day.”

Did You Know?

The Psalms have been part of Christian worship from the beginning of the Christian era. Psalms have been read and sung, by individuals or groups, across the Christian world. In the Middle Ages the daily life of monastic orders was organized around regular times of worship—using the Psalms. They have also been used for public and private prayers—praying the Psalms. They express our frustrations, suffering, questions, and affirmation of our trust in God, who cares for and protects us in ways that have resonated with peoples' experiences across time and place. The Psalms connect real life with real answers.

CREATION JOINS OUR WORSHIP

DECLARE HIS GLORY

Psalm 96:3-10

Our songs should tell of God's "marvelous deeds among all peoples," that is, to declare His glory. His "glory" is revealed in what He does, how He acts. All of creation and history becomes a "theater" of His glory. If we look carefully we will see God's work displayed all around us. But that doesn't move the conversation away from what God is doing in us. Irenaeus, one of the church fathers, reminds us that, "It is the living human being who is the glory of God." That is, God's glory is not about remote magnificence, but about our salvation and transformation which declares and reveals Him in His mercy, power, and grace.

Our worship should also acknowledge that God is the creator of all that is, the God above all gods. He, alone, is worthy of praise and worship. His ultimate authority and Lordship should be declared in songs and praise, but also in our living. If He is truly Lord, He should be revealed as Lord in the actions and character of our lives. "Worship" that is musically enthusiastic, but disconnected from transformation of life by His evident rule, is really only a concert. "Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness" (v.9). Where He is Lord, holiness is being realized, transformation is happening. To worship is to participate in that in-breaking of His kingdom. The reordering of all things and all authority has begun. All nations, rulers, and powers will be brought to submission before Him. Our experience of sanctification is an important instance of this reordering. We are being reclaimed into the image of Christ as we submit to His rule and reign in our lives. This is worship that is pleasing to God.

Psalm 96:11-13

God's redemption extends to all of creation. In a theme that frequently recurs in the Psalms, the psalmist declares that creation, itself, is called to rejoicing and praise. One way this is revealed is in the bless-

Think About It

Frequent use of the Psalms has a very practical purpose. In addition to encouraging and inspiring us, they serve to “align” us. That is, they give us a corrective to the values of the world around us and provide a different perspective to see and assess our lives. They help us to re-train our “sight” to see like Jesus sees. Just as a piano tuner rings a tone to which they tune the strings of a piano, so the Psalms ring out a persistent “tone” to which we can be “re-tuned.”

ing of creation when God is Lord. Where God rules, prosperity and fruitfulness quickly follow. When God reigns, blessings happen. Even the theme of judgment becomes hopeful. It is not primarily about punishment, but the assurance that God will, in the end, make everything right—as it should be. The created world will flourish and prosper.

A BENEDICTION OF PRAISE

Psalm 117:1-2

Psalm 117 is the shortest of the psalms, but it doesn't lack for meaning. It would have been sung in a service of worship by all the people in response to their experience of God's appearance to save them, giving them a new song. It offers the concise conclusion that life finds its meaning and hope in God and His active love toward us. We are blessed to live enfolded in His great love and His enduring faithfulness toward us. This reality and hope transcend all claims of nations or peoples and brings us together in a final choir of united thanksgiving and praise. In light of this great and gracious truth, we can only conclude by declaring “Praise the Lord!”

GOD IS LORD OVER EVERYTHING

Worship reminds us that God is Lord over everything—every time, every place, every circumstance, every power. That declaration invites us to submit to His Lordship, trusting Him in every aspect of our lives. And, while God desires our personal worship, worship is most powerful when it is shared together with the community of God's people, together declaring the miracle of God's grace at work in us.

REFLECT

In what ways will you worship God today?

CARL LETH

STEWARSHIP

August

21

Scripture challenges us to grasp the full ramifications of cooperation and collaboration with God as trustees, managing the resources so generously provided.

THE WORD

GENESIS 1:28 **G**od blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase

KEY VERSE

Gin number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

GENESIS 2:15

¹⁵The **LORD** God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15

⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in

sharing with them and with everyone else.¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

ENGAGE THE WORD

All that we see and experience in the world around us is God's creation and gift to us. Enjoyment of creation and its stewardship are ours to receive. The stewardship of creation has been a responsibility of God's people since the beginning. As holiness people, we should be keenly concerned with this aspect of God's redeeming and restoring work—and the question of our participation in it.

RULING THE EARTH

Genesis 1:28; 2:15

The idea that stewardship of creation is our responsibility is embedded in the very beginning of our story. In fact, it is a commission that God gave to us—"fill the earth," "subdue it," and "rule over" it. Strong language! There have been times this strong language has been misunderstood, as if it meant to give human beings unlimited license to use or misuse creation as we might see fit, for our own self-interest. Sadly, we can easily point to practices in history that presumed just such license. But that's not what this passage is really saying. We are empowered to rule, certainly, but as stewards on behalf of the King who is the "owner." Our rule should reflect the character and purposes of His rule. That is, rule creation as God would (which is what He purposes to do through us). We are empowered and commissioned to rule and subdue the created world just as Christ rules and subdues us.

STEWARDSHIP IS A WAY OF LIVING

Stewardship is not just a responsibility, a task assigned to us. It is a way of life, a way of living. It encompasses how we see ourselves, the resources around us and at our disposal, and how our use of them defines our relationship to the world and others. And it is a way of abundance of life.

Did You Know?

Our relationship with the world (environment) has been grounded in God's creation and our stewardship. In the period of the early church Gnostic teachings tried to separate Christianity from the created world, but this was thoroughly rejected. Until the modern period, natural philosophy (science) was a discipline of theological study, exploring the world God created in order to find Him in it. In our tradition, Wesley had an active interest in the created world as a spiritual concern.

WORSHIP

GENEROSITY

2 Corinthians 9:6-9

The language of sowing and reaping draws from the agricultural life to illustrate a surprising dynamic of the kingdom economy. When we give (sow) generously, we also are rewarded (reap) generously. Worldly culture calls us to harbor and protect what we have. We may give, but we give moderately and carefully, making sure that we don't give away too much. But God desires a generous giver who is "cheerful," joyful in the giving. Of course, this reduces our reserves and our own ability to maintain a personal "safety net," but it calls us to shift our dependence and confidence from what we have to who God is, and His faithful provision for us. Stewardship as generosity is trusting in the Lord who is attending to the welfare of his people.

ABUNDANCE

2 Corinthians 9:10-11

Dependence and trust in God is to embrace the multiplying economy of the kingdom. When we try to control our resources, we actually restrain God from being able to bless us. When we give freely as He teaches and leads us, we discover that our loss of control actually releases God to "increase" and "enlarge" our "harvest," until we are "enriched in every way." Of course, the abundance comes full cycle as a means to enable us for further acts of generosity. That's the economy of the kingdom.

2 Corinthians 9:12-14

When we practice kingdom stewardship we are participating with God in His redemptive, restoring work. Our generosity effects God's gracious work in a fallen and broken world. When healing and restoration happen, praise to God results. A wounded creation is moved to joyous thanksgiving and worship. Once I was blind, but now I see! Praise and worship arise

Think About It

In Romans 8:19-23, Paul draws a connection between creation and redemption/restoration. Creation, itself, "waits in eager expectation," and that the whole creation has been groaning in anticipation of its "liberation." The new creation of God includes renewal of the natural world. Does that suggest that we should consider what that might mean for us, the church? Is creation care an essentially Christian concern?

spontaneously. Our obedient generosity of self, time, and resources results in praise to God.

THIS INDESCRIBABLE GIFT!

2 Corinthians 9:15

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" Paul is referring to the "gift" of stewardship, generosity participating obediently in God's work of restoration, the bringing of the kingdom. We may see stewardship of the earth or our personal resources as duty. It becomes a topic we avoid or downplay, but not Paul. He sees this in another way. It is a radical call to a countercultural way of living. It's a kingdom lifestyle full of joy and praise.

THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD

In our contemporary culture concern for careful stewardship of the natural world has been co-opted by groups that operate from values and assumptions that are often at odds with a Christian faith. But the mission of creation care is embedded in the Christian story. Christians were interested in the natural world long before it became a modern political issue.

The affirmation of God's active, direct role in the natural world is at the core of a Christian worldview. To participate in the healing care of a wounded natural world is an expression of holiness. God has declared His intention to restore creation from the disorder and death caused by sin. Therefore, it becomes a value for us as well. This is my Father's world. Let us rejoice in that truth and live into it together.

REFLECT

In what ways can you fulfill the role of steward today?

CARL LETH

August
28

TEACHING, PREACHING, AND HEALING

Jesus provides the pattern for how we share the good news of the kingdom of God with those around us.

THE WORD

**MATTHEW
9:35-38**

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.³⁷ **Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.**³⁸ **Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”**

**MATTHEW
10:1**

¹Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

5-10

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans.⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

⁹“Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—¹⁰no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep.

16-20

¹⁶“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues.¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.¹⁹ But when they

arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say,²⁰for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Have you ever visited a fire station? So cool. Trucks gleaming, equipment ready, and firefighters ready to go. A really fun experience. However, to hear that alarm sound, see firefighters jump into action, gear quickly put on and into place, trucks roaring to life, and lights and sirens announcing the departure of the firefighter is a totally different experience. Visiting a quiet fire station is exciting, but seeing the fire station go into action is truly amazing!

Today's session is illustrating the same principle for the church. It is when we "move out" that the excitement of the kingdom breaks out. That's when the real action starts. That's when truly amazing things happen.

MOVING OUT

Matthew 9:35-38

We get the heart of the message right away—"Jesus went." Jesus was an action person. He certainly valued times for prayer and quiet reflection, but those times found their fulfillment in action. Jesus was always going. His moving motivation is clear. He sees the crowds and their distressed condition, lacking direction and hope. This is more than an observation, noticing the restless crowd. Jesus really "sees" them, with understanding and compassion. And once He has "seen" them, He has to "go."

Jesus' plan of action is clear. It includes teaching, preaching (proclaiming), and healing. He has what the people need. But He has to enable them to see and accept that. Jesus goes and He acts. Posting a sign or leaving a note may be options that God can use, but more commonly He acts through people who are present and active, bringing the reality of the kingdom where they are through what they say and how they

Did You Know?

In the ancient world snakes (or serpents) were believed to have special wisdom, as well as other powers or attributes. Figures of snakes were often found on symbols of power or in association with kings or rulers. They lacked the more negative perceptions we often have of snakes in our modern culture. So, when Jesus calls us to be wise as serpents He was using the highest cultural image of wisdom. In other words, Jesus called His disciples to be as wise and insightful as they could be in dealing with others.

live. The obvious challenge is that kind of “going” requires lots of “evangelists” who are ready and willing to go. So, the message moves quickly from what Jesus was doing to His prayer for others to join Him in this urgent work.

GOOD NEWS

Matthew 10:1, 5-10

Jesus acts to model the move to action that He calls us to make. He has been teaching and preaching, but now He needs the disciples to join Him in the work. As they (and we) go out, the heart of the message to declare is “the kingdom of God has come.” And when the kingdom comes, everything changes. The sick are healed; even the dead are raised again. People who have terrible, unhealable disorders are made whole. Those whose lives are controlled by destructive powers are set free.

Jesus is expecting that where His disciples declare the coming of the kingdom, His rule will break in and remake what has been disordered by sin, restoring what we have lost and discovering the new being Jesus brings to us. What good news! The hopeless can find hope. And we can declare this radical possibility because we have also received it! We freely (abundantly, generously, lavishly) received the transforming grace of Christ when the kingdom of God broke into our lives and continues to graciously “break in.” We can give joyful, thankful witness to the reality and hope of this kingdom. When we do that, God can work powerfully in the lives of those we encounter.

BAD NEWS

Matthew 10:16-20

Jesus is no starry-eyed visionary. He knows what is coming. He was already experiencing it. Soon it would take Him to His death. Those who follow Him will also pass this way. In our society we have enjoyed social acceptance, even respect in the past. These days we are experiencing something new, at least for us. Our

Think About It

The Christian faith is grounded in the incarnation—God became flesh and dwelt among us. In the incarnation God revealed who He is and what He is like. In other words, it wasn't just something He did; it was an expression of who He is. This means that for Christ-followers, if we want to be like Him, we must be people who bend down and reach out as Jesus did. Going out into the world, then, should not just be an activity we do, but an acting out of God's nature and heart in us, being like Him.

culture does not like what we are bringing. When we follow Jesus and His kingdom we challenge cultural assumptions and claims. Amazingly, we are surprised! But Jesus has already told us what we can expect. Trouble. The powers of the earth will tenaciously defend what they have claimed as their own. When we declare kingdom liberation to their captives we challenge their place and prestige. Liberation is always bad news to the slave master! Expect pushback. Don't be surprised to find that we are regarded with disdain (or worse) by the powers that hold this world captive.

On the other hand, we have the assurance that the One who sends us also goes with us. Jesus' promise to provide what we will need to say is more than the assurance that we will get a quality speech just in time. It is an affirmation that He will provide what we need when we need it. So, don't worry. This is a team competition! The Spirit will accompany us all of the way.

A NEW KINGDOM HAS COME!

Visiting a church that is well-organized and equipped is lots of fun. But it's even better to hear the alarm ringing and the church scrambling into action. Moving out into the world to declare—in word and deed—that a new kingdom has come and everything old can be made new! Now that's really exciting!

REFLECT

In what ways will you participate in God's kingdom today?

CARL LETH

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Summer 2022:

Hebrews 4:14

Hebrews 12:1-2

Psalm 96:8-9

COMING NEXT QUARTER

FALL 2022

Unit 1: The Story of a People (Exodus)

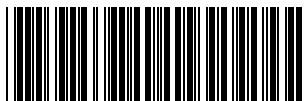
Each story has a beginning. For the Israelites, their beginning was filled with miraculous encounters with God. During this study, we will see how God led the people from slavery toward the promised land.

Unit 2: God's Early Leaders (Judges)

This study looks at specific leaders in Israel from the time of Joshua's death until the time of the monarchy.

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