

*He has obtained a more excellent ministry*

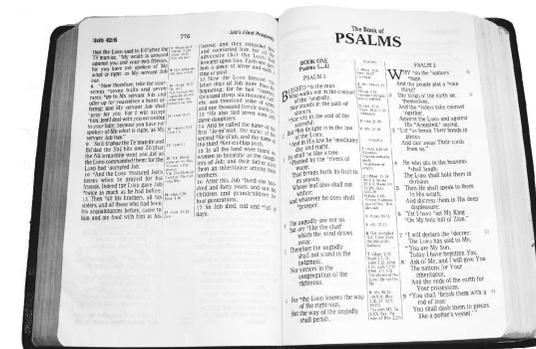
The apostle stops to remind us of the main point of his message: we Christians have a glorious high priest who is far superior to the prophets, to the angels, to Moses, to Joshua and to Aaron. He is king as well as high priest – *seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens* (1; cp. 1:3). The Lord Jesus does not minister like a Levitical high priest in a sanctuary made by man such as the tabernacle or the temple. He ministers in the very presence of God in heaven (2). The apostle does not explain in verse 3 what Christ is offering; he does this in chapter 9, verses 13 and 14. The priesthood, sacrifices and offerings of the Levitical order were but a shadow, a copy, of the heavenly priesthood of Christ (3–5).

The Lord Jesus is not only superior in his person but also in his ministry. *He has obtained a more excellent ministry* than the Levitical priests of the Old Testament. The apostle shows that he is mediator of a better covenant (6); in chapter 9 he is shown to be the priest who serves in a better tabernacle who offered a better sacrifice. Stuart Olyott reminds us of the peril of apostasy. If we walk away from the Lord Jesus, ‘there is nowhere else to go except into outer darkness’ (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 90).

**It is a great source of comfort and encouragement to know that the Lord Jesus represents his people in heaven.** He perfectly loves us and understands us. We can come to him with our burdens and trials knowing that he does hear our cries. He is graciously working out his purposes for us even in the most perplexing and difficult circumstances. *The throne of the Majesty in the heavens* (1) is a throne of grace. *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (4:16).

# PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



## June 2013

Bible readings from Psalms 22 and 23  
Philemon, Hebrews chapters 1 to 8

*Such a high priest was fitting for us*

The Levitical priesthood and the law were imperfect, hence the need for something else to take their place (11,18–19). God ordained the Levitical priesthood to foreshadow that of Christ. We have already seen that the Lord Jesus, belonging to the order of Melchizedek, has a far greater priesthood. His priesthood is superior because:

- It was confirmed by the oath of God. The Levites did not have this oath (20–21).
- It is an everlasting and unchangeable priesthood (24–25).
- Of the greatness of his person. He is *holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens* (26).
- His work is perfect and his sacrifice complete. He does not need to offer up daily sacrifices. He offered himself up once for all on the cross at Calvary. Christ's sacrifice cannot be repeated (27). The Roman Catholic Mass is an act of defiance against God. The priest claims to offer up Christ as a sacrifice during the Mass, and the 'wafer' and the wine supposedly turn into the flesh and blood of Christ. If we love God and his word, if we rejoice in the perfect once-for-all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, we will hate such practices. Many of the Reformers were burned alive because they refused to accept this blasphemous doctrine.

We must never pray to God through the saints or Mary. **We come to God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest, who loves us and prays for us (25).** He is our perfect high priest, who made the perfect sacrifice to save us. *Such a high priest was fitting for us* (26). Phil Arthur comments, 'Why should we take Jesus for our priest? Because none of the others can do what he has done. As verse 27 says, they were sinners themselves. A sinful mediator cannot help me: he too has offended God. He needs a mediator himself!' (NO TURNING BACK, page 134).

The Lord Jesus perfectly meets all our needs and *he is also able to save to the uttermost* (completely) *those who come to God through him* (25). **Let us encourage ourselves in our wonderful Saviour.**

*All Scripture quotations are in italics and are taken from the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.*

*Now consider how great this man was*

The apostle has already demonstrated that the Lord Jesus is vastly superior to the prophets, to angels, to Moses and to the Levitical priesthood. He continues to show how Christ's priesthood is far greater than that of the Levites. In the Old Testament from the time of the Exodus a man could only be a priest if he belonged to certain family groups within the tribe of Levi. The Lord Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah; he could not be a Levitical priest (14). We are now taught about the significance of Melchizedek (cp. 5:6–10). The apostle writes, '*Now consider how great this man was*' (4).

Melchizedek, whose name means '*king of righteousness*', was also king of Salem meaning '*king of peace*' (2). He was priest of the Most High God (1). Melchizedek's origin and end are unknown and in this respect he was a 'type' of the Son of God, who had no beginning and will have no end (3). After Abraham had conquered the four kings, he was met by Melchizedek, who blessed him. Abraham then gave a tenth (a tithe) of the spoils of war to Melchizedek (1, 4; cp. Genesis 14:18–20). The apostle shows that it is the greater who blesses the lesser, and that the lesser gives tithes to the greater. Melchizedek was therefore greater than Abraham, and thus greater than Levi, who, as a descendant of Abraham, paid tithes through his ancestor Abraham (6–9).

The Levitical priesthood did not bring *perfection*; it failed to achieve its intended purpose. Another priestly order was required and this order is that of Melchizedek (11). The Jews knew that the promised Messiah would be *a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek* (17; cp. Psalm 110:4). The apostle shows how the Lord Jesus fulfils the prophecy in Psalm 110. The '*order of Melchizedek*' is greater than that of the Levitical priesthood.

**In considering 'how great this man was' we are encouraged to think about the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest. He is our king of righteousness and our king of peace. We will go on to consider his greatness tomorrow.**

*All those who see me laugh me to scorn*

The Lord Jesus was so crushed, physically and emotionally, when he suffered on the cross that he exclaimed, '*But I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people*' (6). The intense hatred of his enemies is also portrayed in this psalm. They are described as '*bulls*' and '*a raging and roaring lion*' (12–13) and as '*dogs*' (16). These dogs are not friendly domesticated pet dogs but the wild, scavenging, dirty, nasty, ferocious creatures still common in some countries. In Scripture the most wicked and vile people are likened to dogs: *Outside (of heaven) are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters* (Rev. 22:15).

Compare the crucifixion account in Matthew chapter 27 with this psalm:–

Verse 1 with Matthew 27:46.

Verse 8 with Matthew 27:43.

Verse 18 with Matthew 27:35.

Christ's crucifixion is spoken of in verse 16, and his thirst (John 19:28) is vividly described in verse 15: *My tongue clings to my jaws*. The physical sufferings of Christ were terrible, but he had also to endure the wicked mocking of men. *All those who see me laugh me to scorn* (6–8, 12–13).

*O, make me understand it,  
Help me to take it in,  
What it meant to thee, the Holy One,  
To bear away my sin.*

(Katherine A.N. Kelly)

**We were bought at a tremendous price. Let us show that we love the Lord Jesus by seeking always to please him. Let us gratefully worship and adore him.**

*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD*

The psalm began with the Saviour isolated on the cross and feeling that his prayer was not heard (1–2). In verse 21 however he is able to affirm, ‘*You have answered me.*’ The glory following his sufferings is described from verse 22 to the end of the psalm (see Hebrews 2:12 which shows that verse 22 refers to Christ).

Those who fear the Lord want to praise him and glorify him. How is God glorified? He is glorified by the praise of his people. *You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob glorify him* (23). Christians are the spiritual descendants of Jacob (cp. Romans 2:29; Galatians 3:29). The Lord says, *Whoever offers praise glorifies me* (Psalm 50:23).

**The blessings of the gospel will reach every part of the world. The sovereign God will bring men from every nation to acknowledge and worship him (27–28).** *All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD* (27). This is a great promise for us in our work of evangelism and an encouragement to support missionary work and to pray for God’s servants. We should be encouraged as we make known the gospel, knowing that Christ’s death was not in vain. *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied* (Isaiah 53:11). He will have a godly posterity serving him for ever and telling of his righteousness to succeeding generations (30–31). They will glorify God in their praise, declaring *that he has done this* (31). We are unable to save ourselves. We owe our salvation in its entirety to our glorious Saviour. He is worthy of our love and praise.

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Doth his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

(Isaac Watts)

*An anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast*

God’s promises are absolutely reliable – *it is impossible for God to lie* and they give us *strong consolation* (18). When a man wishes to convince someone of his trustworthiness, he will swear by someone greater than himself in making an oath. In courts of justice witnesses ‘swear by almighty God’. The Lord wants us to rely on his word and on his promises. He graciously confirms his word with an oath. When he made promises to Abraham, he swore by himself, for there is no one greater than God (13).

We have inherited marvellous promises in Christ (12)! The Christian hope is the confident expectation of Christ’s return and of being with him in the glory of heaven. We have two immutable (unchangeable) things to confirm us in this hope – God’s word and his oath. We can be confident in these two things because *it is impossible for God to lie*. Christians are described as those *who have fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us* (18). Dr. F.F. Bruce comments, ‘We are refugees from the sinking ship of this present world-order, so soon to disappear; our hope is fixed in an eternal order, where the promises of God are made good to his people in perpetuity.’ (quoted by G. Wilson in HEBREWS, published by Banner of Truth).

Like those early readers of the letter to the Hebrews, we may be severely shaken by suffering and intense pressure. We may feel that our trials are tossing us around like a ship in a gale. Never forget, we have a glorious hope *as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast*. It rests on Christ, our great high priest, who has entered heaven as our *forerunner* to represent us (19–20). This hope anchors us and gives us stability in this turbulent and uncertain world.

**Have you been forgetting God’s promises? Think about some of them and encourage yourself in them and you will find yourself rejoicing in the Lord.**

*Things that accompany salvation*

The apostle has given a stern warning to his readers, but he now seeks to encourage them and to reassure them that he did not believe that their faith was spurious. He shows his affection for them by addressing them as ‘*Beloved*’ (the only time that this term is used in this letter): *Beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation* (9). What are these *things that accompany salvation*? The apostle refers to their *work and labour of love* which they had shown for the sake of Christ in ministering to the saints (fellow-believers, 10). He encourages them by reminding them that God is righteous; he is not unjust and he will not forget all their service for him. They loved the Lord and they loved his people, but they were disheartened through trial and persecution (10:32–33). They needed to persevere!

The apostle writes, ‘*We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end*’ (11). He wanted to be sure that every one of them was genuine in their faith, that there was no doubt about their salvation. Only *the Lord knows those who are his* (2 Timothy 2:19) but it is an encouragement to see Christians progressing in their knowledge of God, in their love for his people, and persevering in trouble and trial. We must not become *sluggish* in our Christian lives (12 – the same Greek word is translated ‘*dull*’ in 5:11).

Abraham is cited as an example of faith and perseverance. He trusted in God’s promises (eg. Genesis 22:15–18) and *after he had patiently endured* he obtained them (13–15). Let us imitate Abraham and those like him, who through faith and patience inherited the promises of God. Are the ‘*things that accompany salvation*’ obvious in your life? **Do you love the Lord and his people? Are you working and labouring for God? He sees all that you are doing and he will not forget the things that you do for him (10).**

*The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want*

Are you able to recite Psalm 23 by heart? If not, be determined to memorise this psalm which has been a source of comfort for God’s people throughout the ages. Never let its familiarity rob you of its richness. I want particularly to direct your thoughts to the significance of the opening words, *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*. This wonderful promise is for every believer! There is no want (lack) for those who fear the Lord and seek him (Psalm 34:9–10). Consider what this means to us:

- He provides for us, supplying all our spiritual and material needs (2; cp. Philippians 4:19).
- He leads us (2–3).
- He restores us when we stray from him (3).
- He comforts us in the dark valley experiences (4).
- He protects us (5).
- He causes our ‘*cup*’ to overflow with blessings (5–6).
- He has secured our future in heaven (6).

The Lord Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, purchased these blessings for us at tremendous cost. He laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11,15,17; cp. Romans 8:32). Are you one of the Lord’s sheep? His sheep hear his voice and they follow him in joyful obedience (John 10:3–4). **Have you lost your Christian joy through coldness of heart, through backsliding? Return to your shepherd who will lovingly restore your soul.**

If you are not a Christian, come to the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of your sin, trusting only in him to save you. You will then be able to say, *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*.

*He is my refuge in each deep distress;  
The Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;  
Through floods and flames he leads me safely on,  
And daily makes his sovereign goodness known.*

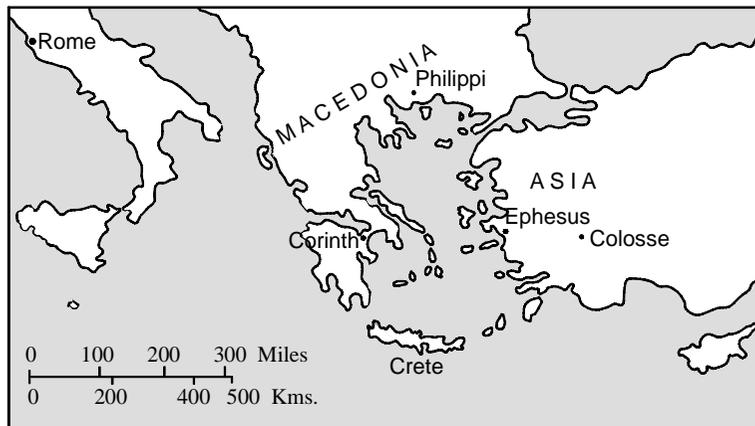
(William Gadsby)

# PHILEMON

25 JUNE

Hebrews 6:4–8

Paul wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon from prison in Rome between AD 61 and AD 63. They were taken to their destination by Tychicus and Onesimus on one trip (Ephesians 6:21–22; Colossians 4:7–9; Philemon 10–12). Philemon, converted under Paul's ministry (19) was a wealthy Christian at Colosse (see map below) whose home was used for worship services (2). Apphia was probably his wife and Archippus his son (2). The latter was a leader in the Colossian church (Colossians 4:17). Paul wrote this letter to secure forgiveness for Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, and to ask Philemon to prepare a guest room for himself. He was expecting prayers for his release from prison to be answered. He then hoped to visit Colosse (8–16, 22).



## *Those who were once enlightened* (2)

We are repeating yesterday's Bible reading to give further consideration to *those who once were enlightened*. It is possible to be a spurious Christian, to be '*enlightened*', knowing true doctrine, to taste the heavenly gift (to share joys of Christian worship and fellowship), to know the working of the Holy Spirit within like the false prophet Balaam (Numbers 24:2) and yet to be lost (Matthew 7:22–23). The false believer appears to share the same experience as the true believer. He hears the word of God but the word does not take lasting root in his heart. He falls away when *tribulation or persecution* arises or becomes taken up with *the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches* (Matthew 13:20–22). He finally rejects Christ and his great salvation.

Stuart Olyott writes, 'Falling away is a deliberate act. It occurs when somebody, by a series of choices, walks away from an active Christian life, although they know full well who the Lord Jesus Christ is and what he has done. They take their eyes off him. In reality they treat him as an imposter and a deceiver, although they know differently, and so in their hearts they crucify him again (verse 6). They behave as if there is nothing good in Christ ...' (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 69).

Satan has misused these verses to torment many a Christian who has a tender conscience. They have been driven to despair, believing that they have committed the unpardonable sin. If you are worried concerning such a thing, it is a good indication that you have NOT blasphemed the Holy Spirit. Those who have are not concerned for their terrible state. A sure indication of salvation is found in the fruit that we bear in our lives (see Galatians 5:22–23). A poor crop of good fruit, or even weak fruit, is different from thorns and briars (7–8). **We have read some solemn verses. Let us take God's word seriously and examine our own hearts (2 Corinthians 13:5).**

*Those who were once enlightened* (1)

This passage is one of the most difficult in the New Testament. William Plumer writes in his commentary on this passage, ‘There is not in the Bible any equal portion of Scripture more awe-inspiring than verses 4, 5 and 6 of this chapter. They have made many a man’s ears to tingle and his heart to tremble. Even the lukewarm have been mightily stirred by them.’ There are three ways of understanding these verses:

1. That a Christian can fall away and lose his salvation.
2. That disobedient Christians will lose their heavenly rewards.
3. That these verses are a solemn warning to false believers.

The golden rule for understanding difficult passages of Scripture is to explain that which is doubtful by that which is clear and certain. We know from many passages of Scripture that a true Christian can never lose his salvation. The Christian has eternal life (John 3:16,36). It would not be eternal life if it could be lost. The believer has been predestined by God to salvation before the world was made (Ephesians 1:4–5). All who are predestined will be glorified (go to heaven – Romans 8:28–30). If we took these verses to mean that a believer could lose his salvation by backsliding, we would have to understand that verse 6 taught the impossibility of the backslider repenting. That is obviously not true. The Lord does restore us when we backslide (Psalm 23:3; Hosea 14:4).

I believe that the tone of these verses is far too solemn to be simply a warning against losing heavenly rewards. **This is a warning to false believers.** *Those who once were enlightened* appeared to be true believers but have turned away from Christ never to return (4). I have known those who have been backslidden for many years to repent and return to the Lord, but I also know of some who appeared to be strong Christians who now reject the gospel and despise those who are true believers. They have hardened hearts and I tremble for them.

*The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you*

Though Paul wrote to Philemon from prison, he considered himself to be the prisoner not of Rome, but of Christ Jesus (1). Philemon may have assisted the apostle during his ministry in Ephesus and been involved in the planting of the church which met in his house. He is described as Paul’s *‘fellow-labourer’*.

Paul gave thanks to God for Philemon and he prayed much for him. The cause of his thanksgiving was that he had heard of Philemon’s *love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints* (4–7). If we truly love the Lord Jesus, we will also love all his people (1 John 4:20–21).

Philemon was a rich man who was also generous. The Bible warns against the danger and snare of riches (1 Timothy 6:9–10), but it does not condemn a person on account of justly acquired wealth. A wealthy Christian has many avenues for service which are denied to others. Philemon’s love for the Lord and his faith were expressed in love and benevolence to fellow-Christians (*‘all the saints’*). He was a man who exemplified what it means *to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful* (Titus 3:14).

Philemon was a great encouragement to Paul. The apostle and his companions had great joy and consolation in the love of this brother. Look at the apostle’s description of his service: *The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother* (7). Deeds of kindness from a heart full of compassion encourage God’s people. Many a discouraged ‘saint’ who is passing through difficult times has been encouraged by such a ministry. We too may refresh *‘the hearts of the saints’* even if we are not wealthy like Philemon. A word of encouragement or some deed of kindness to a hard-pressed believer will be a blessing to him. **Let us seek to fulfil this vital ministry in our church.**

*Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains*

The grace of God and his ways in providence are truly wonderful. ‘Onesimus’ means ‘profitable’ but this slave had been unprofitable to Philemon (see Paul’s play on his name in verse 11). He had stolen money or property from his master and had run away, finding his way to Rome (18). While there he came into contact with the imprisoned Paul. He was wonderfully saved and the apostle described him as *my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains* (10). The unprofitable slave had, by the grace of God, become profitable (11). The restrictions of imprisonment did not bring an end to Paul’s usefulness in Christian service (Philippians 1:12). He was able to preach the gospel to the palace guard and he wrote the letters which are now part of the New Testament and are such a blessing to us. Adverse circumstances cannot prevent God from doing his sovereign work. Let us persevere in prayer for those on our hearts who are not yet saved. No one is beyond the reach of God.

When runaway slaves were caught they were often severely beaten or put to death. Onesimus was now dear to the heart of Paul, but he had to return to his master (12–14). This was no easy matter, though he was accompanied by Tychicus, a highly respected brother (Colossians 4:7–9). Paul was tender and tactful in his appeal to Philemon to forgive and to receive Onesimus. He appealed *‘for love’s sake’* and as the aged prisoner for his *‘son’* in the faith (9–11). Philemon was known for his ministry of refreshing the saints (7) and Paul appealed, *Refresh my heart in the Lord* (20). He had been instrumental in Philemon’s conversion and he reminded him of his indebtedness to him (Paul). He wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would have received him. He asked his friend to put anything owed by the slave to his account (17–19). He was confident that Philemon would go beyond what was asked of him (20–21). **Are we prepared to forgive and to receive those who have wronged us (Colossians 3:13)**. Such an attitude is refreshing and a great blessing in any church.

*Let us go on to perfection*

This chapter begins with another of the statements beginning with the words, *‘Let us ...’*. The apostle urges, *‘Let us go on to perfection’* (1). *‘Perfection’* is not held before us as a goal obtainable in this life. There is no perfection until we reach heaven. We should aim to be perfect, however. The word *‘perfection’* is better translated ‘maturity’. We have already seen that the first readers of this letter were very immature Jewish Christians, who could hardly cope with the elementary teachings of Christ.

Stuart Olyott helpfully suggests that verses 1 to 3 speak of three pairs of fundamental truths:

- How the Christian life begins – *repentance from dead works and ... faith towards God* (1).
- Where the Christian life leads: *of resurrection of the dead, and ... eternal judgment* (2).
- What lies between in our day to day Christian life: *of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands* (2). We were all baptised by the Holy Spirit when we became Christians. Stuart Olyott comments, ‘The outward and visible sign of this is baptism in water. The inward baptism and the outward baptism are thus, in fact, one baptism, so as Christians, we have *one Lord, one faith, one baptism* (Ephesians 4:5) ... It is a basic tenet of the Christian faith that the Christian life is lived in the context of local churches whose submission to Christ is ensured by godly men whom he has chosen. The babe in Christ who does not understand this will always remain immature’ (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, see pages 61 and 62). The laying on of hands probably refers to the setting apart of elders, deacons or other ministries such as evangelists and church planters.

Some Christians claim that they are just ‘simple believers’, when really they are babes in the Christian faith. **There is all the difference in the world between knowing the simplicity that is in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3) and being a spiritual babe.** *Let us go on to perfection* (‘maturity’).

*By this time you ought to be teachers*

The writer of this letter had much to say concerning Christ's Melchizedek priesthood which were *hard to explain* because the Hebrews had *become dull of hearing* (11). They should now have been teachers of the word but they needed to be taught *the first principles of the oracles of God* (the Old Testament, verse 12). They were in danger of relapsing into Judaism because of their own spiritual immaturity.

If a child did not develop and could not take solid food at the age of five but was taking only milk, the parents would be desperately worried, and rightly so. In a spiritual sense many Christians never develop, but remain as babes. This was the problem with many of the first readers of this letter. Puritan William Gouge, in his comments on these verses, writes of 'the disgrace of spiritual babes'. What are some of the signs of spiritual immaturity?

- The immature person is *dull of hearing* when God's word is preached and taught. The word of God does not sink in and no effort is made to gain any understanding (11). The Greek word translated 'dull' is rendered 'sluggish' in 6:12.
- The spiritual babe needs to be spoon-fed with the milk (the absolute basics) of God's word. He is unable to take in the solid food (the deeper things) of the word (12–13).
- A lack of discernment (14). If we are not well grounded in the word of God, we will be *carried about with every wind of doctrine*, believing false teachers (Ephesians 4:14). This is a great problem today.

We all start our Christian lives as spiritual babes but we must not remain as babes. We must get weaned off spiritual 'baby-food'. Spiritual immaturity is inexcusable if we have been Christians for some time. *By this time you ought to be teachers* (12). We should be able to teach, help and encourage other believers, especially those who are new Christians. **We never stop learning in the Christian life, but it is tragic if we hardly begin.**

**HEBREWS**

We do not know whom God inspired to write the letter to the Hebrews. Some believe that it was the apostle Paul but the Greek style here is very different from that of Paul. Moreover, in his letters Paul identifies himself in the opening greetings, but this is not found in Hebrews. Others argue that Apollos, Barnabas or one of Paul's fellow-workers wrote the letter. Origen, one of the early Church Fathers said, 'Who it is who wrote the epistle, only God knows certainly.'

The letter was probably written between AD 60 and AD 70 (there is no indication in the letter that the Jewish sacrificial system had ceased owing to the destruction of the temple in AD 70). It was sent to Jewish Christians who were discouraged on account of persecution (10:32–36). They were in danger of drifting away from Christ and were lacking in Christian growth and maturity (2:1; 5:12–14). Some had ceased attending the meetings of the church (10:25) and were probably tempted to go back to Jewish ritual. We are shown how Christ, in his person and work, is far greater than the prophets, the angels and Moses. His work accomplished far more than Jewish sacrifices, for by his one sacrifice he has established a better covenant. Several passages give solemn warnings to the readers (2:1–4; 3:1 to 4:13; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; and 12:25–29).

**Key word** – 'Better' (1:4; 6:9; 7:19,22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16,35,40; and 12:24). Notice also the statements beginning 'Let us' (4:1,11,16; 6:1; 10:22,23,24; 12:1,28; and 13:13,15).

**Recommended short commentaries on Hebrews**

Phil Arthur, pastor of Free Grace Baptist Church, Lancaster has written a New Testament commentary on Hebrews which is taken from a series of sermons preached in his church. I have found Phil's work helpful and very practical. If my notes whet your appetite for further study on Hebrews do purchase and read Phil's book 'NO TURNING BACK' (published by Grace Publications Trust).

Stuart Olyott always writes very simply and is easy to follow and understand. I heartily recommend his book *I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!* (published by Banner of Truth). I like books which not only explain Scripture, but challenge me with practical application; this book does just that.

### Outline of Hebrews

<b>1. The Superiority of Christ</b>	–	<b>1:1 to 10:18</b>
a. The Person of Christ (who he is)	–	1:1 to 4:13
Christ greater than the prophets	–	1:1–3
Christ greater than the angels	–	1:4–14
Warning against neglect of so great salvation		2:1–4
Incarnation, suffering and death of Christ	–	2:5–18
Christ greater than Moses	–	3:1–6
Warning against hardness of heart, unbelief and disobedience	–	3:7 to 4:13
b. The Work of Christ (what he does)	–	4:14 to 10:18
Christ – our great High Priest	–	4:14 to 5:10
Exhortation to progress and to persevere in the Christian life.	–	5:11 to 6:20
Christ’s priesthood better than Levitical priesthood	–	7:1 to 8:6
Christ – the Mediator of a better covenant	–	8:7 to 10:18
<b>2. Living the Christian Life</b>	–	<b>10:19 to 13:25</b>
Encouragement to hold fast our confession		10:19–25.
Warning against apostasy	–	10:26–39
Examples of those who persevered by faith		11:1–40
Serving God acceptably	–	12:1 to 13:17
Benediction and closing greetings	–	13:18–25

21 JUNE

Hebrews 5:1–11

### *The author of eternal salvation to all who obey him*

The priesthood is necessary because all men are sinners. Our sin alienates us from God and we need to be reconciled to him. In the Old Testament the priest represented men before God, whereas the prophet represented God before men. The Jewish high priest offered *both gifts and sacrifices for sins* (1). The sacrifices were to bring forgiveness for sin, the offerings were brought as a token of gratitude and devotion to God. The Lord Jesus, our great high priest, is the supreme example of the qualities required of the high priest. He is full of compassion (2:17; 4:15) and he was called by God the Father as high priest *according to the order of Melchizedek* (4–6,10; cp. Psalm 110:4; we shall see the significance of this statement in our notes on Hebrews chapter 7).

The holy Son of God took human flesh and felt as a man feels (5–7). His prayer to God the Father in Gethsemane was with *vehement cries and tears* (7). The Gospels do not mention this, but Mark records that he was *troubled and deeply distressed* (14:33). His suffering was spiritual as well as physical. He endured the wrath of God as his soul was made an offering for sin. He knew travail of soul and *he poured out his soul unto death* (Isaiah 53:10–12). As a man the Lord Jesus shrank from the horror of the sufferings that he was to bear, but his prayer of submission to the Father’s will was heard.

Verse 8 does not mean that the Lord Jesus was not obedient before he suffered. It means that he learned (experienced) the cost of obedience to the Father’s will in his suffering. He is equal with God the Father, but *he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross* (Philippians 2:8) to become *the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him* (9). The Greek word for ‘author’ in this verse is entirely different from the word used in 2:10 and 12:2 where it means ‘prince’, ‘chief’ or ‘beginner’. Here it means the ‘cause’ (of our salvation).

**We have a great high priest who endured terrible suffering to be the author of our eternal salvation. Let us adore him and praise him, and show by our obedience that we really do love him.**

*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace*

These verses begin a new section in the letter to the Hebrews which takes us through to the middle of chapter 10. The Jews highly regarded the Levitical priesthood and its first high priest Aaron. The sinless Son of God is a far greater high priest than any Levitical high priest who offers sacrifices at an altar for himself and the people (7:26–27). His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross is sufficient to save us and has been accepted in heaven.

The Lord Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice to save sinners and he is also our high priest to represent us before God the Father. He has passed through the heavens to appear in the presence of God for us. *Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession* (14; cp. 10:23). We must serve God with reverence and godly fear (1; cp. 12:28), but we may *come boldly to the throne of grace where we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (16). When we pray, we come to a throne – the eternal throne of the King of kings, the throne of almighty God. Nothing is too hard for him (Jeremiah 32:17,27). We also come to a ‘*throne of grace*’ where our great high priest is sympathetic and kind (15). He understands us and loves us.

Are you going through difficult and dark times? Are you being sorely tested? Remember, you are never alone. Our Lord Jesus will bring you through. Come to the Lord Jesus in your weakness and he will give you strength. Come to him with your struggles and trials and he will help you. Come to him repenting of your sins and he will freely forgive you. **Many Christians have needless difficulties because they fail to come to our loving, sympathetic Lord Jesus with their needs.** *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace.*

*Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong, a perfect plea;  
A great high priest, whose name is love,  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

(Charitie L. Bancroft)

*God ... has in these last days spoken to us by his Son*

God is not silent! He *spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets* (1). ‘*The fathers*’ are the people of ancient Israel who lived before the Lord Jesus came into the world. Those Israelites were more privileged than any other nation because God sent prophets to them to reveal his will for them, to teach them about God and to prophesy of the coming of a far greater prophet, the Messiah (the Christ). The prophets were highly esteemed by the Jews (Matthew 23:29–30) but they only knew part of the picture. How thankful we should be for our Saviour and for all that he has revealed.

*God ... has in these last days spoken to us by his Son* (2). How wonderful that God speaks to rebellious man, showing his great love in giving the Lord Jesus to die for us. The Lord Jesus Christ is far greater than the prophets. He is the fulfilment of their prophecies (Luke 24:44). In his ministry on earth the Lord Jesus astounded the people with his wisdom and his teaching. God the Father endorsed his ministry saying, ‘*This is my beloved Son. Hear him!*’ (Mark 9:7). Are you listening for his voice as you read his word and when you hear it preached? Do you gladly obey the word of God when it challenges you or rebukes you?

Stuart Olyott writes, ‘God’s revelation in the Lord Jesus Christ is superior in character because it is complete. It is superior in time, because no revelation will follow it. It is superior in destination, because it is to us. It is superior in agent because, unlike the Old Testament, which came through feeble human prophets, it has come through God’s Son’ (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 11).

God has spoken by his Son. He has nothing more to say to us by way of new revelation. The apostles taught what they had heard and learned from the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23). **It is most important that we understand that God has not sent any other prophet with new revelations since the Lord Jesus came into the world.**

*The brightness of his glory and the express image of his person*

The Lord Jesus is no ordinary prophet. He is the holy Son of God, through whom God the Father created the world. Verse 3 teaches us some vital facts concerning the person of the Lord Jesus:

- Jesus is *the brightness of his (God's) glory*. Phil Arthur writes, 'He is not bright with the glory of God; he is the very radiance itself. Sunbeams are inseparable from the sun. In the same way Jesus and his Father share the same essence' (NO TURNING BACK, page 23).
- He is *the express image of his person*. When a coin is stamped out, it bears the exact image of the die by which it was stamped. The Lord Jesus has revealed God as no other prophet could. He shares the divine nature of God (John 14:9–11).
- He upholds all things by *the word of his power*. Prophets were messengers sent from God, but they did not have power and authority like Christ. He not only created all things (2; cp. John 1:1–3), he is also active in controlling all things in the universe. Remember how astonished his disciples were when he spoke and a great storm was calmed (Matthew 8:23–27). The Lord Jesus is the sovereign God!
- He *by himself purged our sins*. He only is the Saviour whose blood cleanses us from all sin when we seek his forgiveness (1 John 1:7–9).
- He ascended into heaven and is now at the right hand of God, reigning supreme over all the universe (3,13).

Stuart Olyott writes, 'If you have never turned to Christ, it is to this Christ you have never come ... To turn away from Christ ... is to turn away from the most glorious of all to the shoddy. It is to turn your back on the radiance of God's glory in order to walk into outer darkness' (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 14).

**Let us think about the greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ and of his marvellous love for us. Let us worship him, adore him, praise him and rejoice in him.**

*The word of God is living and powerful*

Have you noticed the stress on the importance of the word of God as you have read the letter to the Hebrews?

- *God . . . has in these last days spoken to us by his Son (1:1).*
- *Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard (2:1).*
- *Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (3:7–8, 15).*
- *For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it (4:2).*

Stuart Olyott comments, 'There is no coming to faith without the Word, and there is no continuing in the faith without the Word. Those who neglect the Scriptures cannot grow in grace and knowledge and cannot know intimacy with the Lord. It is by his Word that he does what he does in his creatures' (I WISH THAT SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 47).

We are reminded that *the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (12)*. It is not a 'dead letter' which we can afford to ignore. The Bible is the mighty sword of the Spirit (cp. Ephesians 6:18) which exposes our thoughts and motives and which reveals any unbelief and sin residing within us.

We cannot hide ourselves or our thoughts from God and we all have to give an account of our lives to him (13). When the Lord Jesus comes again as King and Judge, he will come as *'the Word of God'* from whose mouth *goes a sharp sword, that with it he should strike the nations (Revelation 19:13,15)*. If we refuse to obey God's word, we will hear his awesome voice on the day of judgment pronouncing our eternal loss (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9; Matthew 7:21–23). **It will then be too late to enter God's 'rest'.**

*Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest*

'Rest' in verse 9 is translated from the Greek word meaning 'sabbath-rest'; this is the only place in Scripture where this word is found. This 'rest' is for the people of God today. It is a 'rest' which Joshua (same word as 'Jesus' in Greek; cp. AV) was unable to give to the people who had entered Canaan (8). Matthew Henry describes this 'rest' as a 'rest of grace' and a 'rest of glory'. The 'rest of grace' brings us forgiveness of sin, cleansing, and peace with God. It brings the smile of God upon us and his peace ruling in our hearts (cp. Philippians 4:6–7,11). It is the rest of open access to the throne of grace where we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (16). The 'rest of glory' awaits us in heaven, where we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). In heaven, *there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain* (Revelation 21:4).

Many people believe that they will go to heaven when they die but they have no interest in obeying God. The Lord Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount that we must obey his word if we are to go to heaven (Matthew 7:21–24). Obedience to God's word is an evidence of salvation. We must beware of deceiving ourselves (James 1:22). There is an easy type of Christianity which makes no demands for commitment to a life of discipleship though it pays lip service to the teaching of Scripture. It attracts many but it leads to hell and not to heaven.

*Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest* (11). We are warned that this rest can be missed through unbelief (1–2) and disobedience (11). The unbelieving Israelites despised God's holy word and perished in the wilderness. The Christian life requires diligence, not carelessness. Have you entered the Christian rest? The Lord Jesus promises this rest to all who come to him and join (yoke) themselves to him in faith and obedience (Matthew 11:28–30). We have no excuse for not entering his rest. ***Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest.***

*Let all the angels of God worship him*

The Lord Jesus is greater than the prophets. He is also greater than the angels (1–3; 4–14)! Angels were highly esteemed by the Jews and were prominent in the important events of Jewish history and in the giving of the law (2:2; cp. Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:38,53; Galatians 3:19).

Most of Hebrews chapter 1 is in italic print which indicates that it is quoting from the Old Testament Scriptures. These Scriptures refer to the Lord Jesus Christ and they show that he is the Son of God who is worshipped by the angels (6). Verses 8 and 9 are taken from Psalm 45:6–7. Read this psalm which describes the beauty, the power, the majesty, the grace and the glory of Christ. The Lord Jesus is described as God, whose throne is everlasting. *But to the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of your kingdom'* (8). We are shown two characteristics of Christ's kingdom from these verses:

- It is an everlasting kingdom. Human dynasties come and go. Tyrants whose atrocities and wickedness instilled fear into millions during the last century are gone. Hitler, Stalin, Chairman Mao and Pol Pot are no more. Death has conquered them and they are no longer feared. The Lord Jesus cannot be toppled from his throne!
- It is a righteous kingdom. A sceptre is a symbol of royal authority. Our great King is righteous. He loves righteousness and his rule is just and perfect. The sinless Son of God came into the world and died to save sinners, to make us righteous, to bring us into his wonderful kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy (cp. Romans 14:7).

Phil Arthur writes, 'It is impossible to speak too highly of Jesus. Those of us who are believers need to recapture this sense of his awesome grandeur. God has not sent us a prophet or a shining messenger from the world of angels. The Lord of glory himself has come' (NO TURNING BACK, page 33).

***Let all the angels of God worship him*** (6). **Let us join with them and worship and adore him, for he is God.**

*Let us fear*

This chapter has four exhortations beginning, ‘*Let us ...*’ (1,11,14,16). We are first exhorted, ‘*Let us fear ...*’ (1). The Bible declares that *God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind* (2 Timothy 1:7). When we turn to Christ, the craven fear of God’s judgment is removed (1 John 4:17–18) to be replaced by a reverent and grateful adoration of God. We should fear lest we sin and grieve the Holy Spirit. The liberty that we enjoy as children of God is not a licence for carelessness. Let us remember that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7).

What do these verses in Hebrews tell us to fear?

- We are to fear lest we come short of God’s *rest* (1). The ‘*rest*’ spoken of is not a state of lazy inactivity. When God ‘rested’ from his work of creation (4), it was ‘*rest*’ from that particular work, it was the ‘*rest*’ of accomplishment. He continues to work and to sustain his creation. The entrance of the Jews into Canaan brought them ‘*rest*’ from the hardship of the wilderness wandering. Many of them did not enter into the ‘*rest*’ of Canaan through unbelief and rebellion (5–6; cp. 3:7–11). We are to fear lest we fail to come into God’s ‘*rest*’ (heaven) because of unbelief.
- We must fear lest the word of God does not profit us because it is not *mixed with faith* in us when we hear it preached (2). Let us beware of ‘sermon-tasting’ and of enjoying preaching just for intellectual satisfaction. *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10:17). **To mix God’s word with faith, we must receive it prayerfully and joyfully with a determination to obey it.**

Some Bible versions translate the closing words of verse 2 ‘*because they were not united by faith with those who listened*’. This indicates that there was a division among the Jews who heard the word of God. Some received it with faith but others refused to believe it. When we hear God’s word, we either respond to it in faith, or we resist it and become hardened in heart. ***Let us fear.***

**The meaning of Hebrews chapter 1, verse 6**

The Lord Jesus is described as ‘*the firstborn*’ (6) and ‘*the firstborn over all creation*’ (Colossians 1:15). Vine (Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words) writes, ‘Protokos, firstborn, is used of Christ ... in his relationship to the Father, expressing his priority to, and pre-eminence over, creation, not in the sense of being the first to be born. It is used occasionally of superiority of position in the O.T.; see Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 21:16–17.’ Colossians teaches that Christ is pre-eminent over all things (1:18) and that he is God (2:9).

Jehovah’s Witnesses allege that these verses prove that Jesus had a beginning and cannot be God (while ignoring the plain statements of Scripture which say that Jesus is God). They misunderstand and misuse Scripture. The Bible plainly declares that Christ had no beginning (Hebrews 7:3).

***But when he again brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all the angels of God worship him.’***

*They could not enter in because of unbelief*

We were reminded yesterday that there are many people who appear to be Christians, but they are not true believers. There were many Israelites who proved that they were not true believers. They left Egypt under the leadership of Moses but they failed to enter the promised land because of unbelief. *They could not enter in because of unbelief* (19). There are three questions (16–19) which drive home this point:

- *For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses?*
- *Now with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned ... ?*
- *And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who did not obey?* (16–19; cp. verses 7–8).

How can we kill unbelief as it rises in our hearts?

- We must hear the voice of God (7,15) through the preaching of the word and the reading of Scripture.
- We must *exhort* (encourage) *one another daily* (13). We can only encourage and help others if we are walking in fellowship with the Lord.

Most Christians have struggled with doubts and lack of assurance. **It is important that we recognise the difference between having an evil heart of unbelief and being a person with little faith.** The Lord Jesus is gentle and encouraging to the struggling believer (cp. Matthew 14:31). The person with a hardened heart continually rebels against God, but ‘Mr Little-faith’ loves his Lord and sorrows over his spiritual frailty.

John Bunyan records a conversation between Christian and Hopeful concerning a man called ‘Little-faith’ who was robbed by three rogues on his journey to the Celestial City. He is contrasted with Esau who had no faith and Christian remarked, ‘But Little-faith was of another temper, his mind was on things divine; his livelihood was upon things that were spiritual and from above’ (THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS).

*You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth*

The superiority of the Lord Jesus over the angels is demonstrated further with more quotations from the Old Testament. The words of God the Father to the Son reveal that the Lord Jesus is:

- The Creator of the earth and the heavens. Psalm 102 is a prayer to Jehovah (indicated by the name ‘LORD’). Here in verses 10 to 12, the Psalm is shown to contain a prophecy which refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. As he faces the suffering soon to come upon him, he says, ‘*He shortened my days*’ and he prays to God the Father, ‘*O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days*’ (Psalm 102:24; cp. the prayer of the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane, Luke 22:39–44). God the Father reassures him, ‘*You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands*’ (10; cp. verse 2).
- The eternal, unchanging God. He will fold up the ages as a man folds his cloak and his days cannot be shortened. *They will be changed but you are the same, and your years will not fail* (12; cp. Psalm 102:25–27). The Messiah died but he conquered death.
- At the right hand of God the Father, the conqueror of all his enemies (13; cp. Psalm 110:1). **He reigns for ever. He is far greater than the angels.**

Angels are *ministering spirits* sent forth by God *to minister for those who will inherit salvation* (believers throughout history;14). Their ministry is often used for the good of God’s people. Evil spirits and the powers of darkness hate Christians and seek to harm us. We should, however remind ourselves often of the ministry of God’s angels. They work silently and invisibly on our behalf and this should encourage us (cp. 2 Kings 6:17–18; Psalm 34:7; 91:11–12; Isaiah 37:36; Acts 5:19).

*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*

Our reading today is the first of the ‘warning passages’ in the Book of Hebrews. The word spoken by angels (2) refers to the law given at Sinai (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). God here asks us, ‘If disobedience to the law, given by angels was punished, how much more will those be punished who reject the gospel?’ The gospel of salvation was spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ who is much better than the angels (3; cp. 1:4). It was confirmed by the preaching and teaching of the apostles (4).

God also bore witness to the testimony of the apostles who heard him (Jesus) *both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will* (4). These signs came to an end with the close of the apostolic age (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:12). Do not pay any attention to those who claim to have miracle or healing ministries today. Healing for various ailments is claimed, but where are apostolic miracles such as the blind seeing and the paralysed walking? We look in vain. Our so-called healers leave behind them a trail of deception, disappointment and despair.

We must all beware of drifting away from the Lord (1). Backsliding often begins with a slow drift away from God rather than with a headlong rush into sin. We soon begin to slip when we neglect private prayer and Bible reading. Our time of devotion and fellowship with the Lord is most important. *Therefore we must give all the more careful attention to the things we have heard* (margin reading of verse 1). We do not have to do anything to *neglect so great a salvation* (3). Just do nothing and drift through life without God.

Have you been challenged by the message of salvation? Have you obeyed the word of Christ and turned to him, trusting in him and repenting of your sin? **If your heart is not right with God, let this question be impressed on your mind – How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?**

*Hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*

The apostle now warns us, ‘*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*’ (12). A hardened heart will cause us to depart from the living God and it is *an evil heart of unbelief*.

What lies behind hardness of heart and unbelief? It is *the deceitfulness of sin* (13). How we need to beware of the deceitfulness of sin. When we are tempted, sin presents itself as pleasant, as desirable, as exciting (eg. Genesis 3:5–6; Joshua 7:20–21). Sin, however, brings terrible wages – death (Romans 3:23; James 1:15). Listen to what Matthew Henry says about sin, ‘There is a great deal of deceitfulness in sin; it appears fair, but is filthy; it appears pleasant, but is pernicious; it promises much, but performs nothing.’

I can confirm with much heartache and sorrow that I know of many who are far from God, *hardened through the deceitfulness of sin* (13). They once appeared to be keen Christians and faithful in church attendance; some were friends who were evangelical pastors or church leaders. **We must take seriously the warning from Psalm 95 which is repeated in verse 15, ‘Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’** (cp. 8; 4:7).

Phil Arthur comments on the meaning of ‘hardened’ – ‘The Greek word is related to our word “sclerosis”. How graphic! Someone eats too much fatty food, and as time passes the arteries clog and the blood vessels become like furred up water pipes. The supply of blood becomes sluggish; life is threatened. In the same way spiritual hardening is insidious, slow and fatal. All the while a person claims to be a child of God. At the same time he resists the prompting of God’s Spirit, and little by little, his sensitivity to spiritual things becomes less. Eventually it becomes clear that the outward life shows the true state of a heart that was never right with God at all. How awful! Let the Hebrews beware! Let us also beware!’ (NO TURNING BACK, page 73).

*Do not harden your hearts*

The word *'therefore'* (7) is used yet again, this time as a warning. If the people came to grief and disaster through disobeying Moses, how much more terrible the consequences of disobeying the voice of him who is greater than Moses, the Lord Jesus Christ. The words of Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11 are quoted in this warning. The psalm is described as being spoken by the Holy Spirit (*'as the Holy Spirit says'*). The same is true of all the psalms and of all Scripture. The Bible is the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). *Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit* (2 Peter 1:21).

The *'rebellion'* (8, cp. Psalm 95:8 where the Hebrew is 'Meribah') refers to the incident at the beginning of the journey to Canaan when the Israelites murmured against God in their unbelief. *'The day of trial'* (Hebrew 'Massah', Psalm 95:8) refers to another rebellion which occurred near to the end of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Numbers 20:13). These people had seen great miracles and awe-inspiring deeds, but they still hardened their hearts and rebelled against God. Their hardness of heart excluded them from entering God's *'rest'* (11), both the earthly rest of Canaan and the eternal rest of heaven. Stephen, preaching to the Jews, reminded them that they had rebelled against God throughout their history. He said to them, *'You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you'* (Acts 7:51).

*Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts* (7–8). *'Today'* is this time of grace given by God when he calls us to repentance. A time is coming when it will be too late to seek the Lord. This is why there is an urgent note in the warning of these verses. Notice the further emphasis on the heart. *They always go astray in their heart* (10). We may easily grow cold and hard in our hearts, even though we see God working among us. Have you been complaining against God? Let the scriptures that you have read today be a timely warning. How is your heart before God? **Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life** (Proverbs 4:23).

*But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels*

Psalm 8, which is quoted in today's reading, expresses awe, wonder and worship of God the Almighty Creator of the vast universe. It breathes out adoration and praise that God is mindful of man.

When God made Adam, he made him lord over all creatures living on the earth (Genesis 1:26–28). Adam lost this privilege because of his sin and he had no power to undo the curse upon the ground (Genesis 3:17–19). He was made *'a little lower than the angels'* (7). All this is reversed for the men and women who belong to Christ. God has not chosen angels to rule over the world to come (the new heaven and the new earth), but man (5–8). We shall rule with the Lord Jesus (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 22:4–5). This is one of the reasons that our salvation is *'so great'*. How wonderful that God not only saves wretched, sinful men and women, but brings them into his glorious family and exalts them above angels!

Even more amazing is the way in which God has chosen to save us. The Lord Jesus left the glory of heaven to be *made a little* (*'for a little while'* – ESV and margin reading of NKJV) *lower than the angels* (9). In other words, he became man, taking human flesh to suffer and to die for sinners. He tasted death in its most terrible sense, for he knew separation from God the Father. He took the cup of suffering and drank it to its bitter dregs so that we could have the cup of blessing (1 Corinthians 10:16). He died in terrible anguish crying, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* (Mark 15:34), so that we could know reconciliation and peace with God. **He did this to bring us to glory, to fulfil our destiny to rule with him over all things. Hallelujah! What a Saviour! He is worthy of our love, devotion and joyful obedience to his holy will.**

NB. To *'taste death for everyone'* (9) does not mean that Jesus died to save everyone, or that everyone will be saved. He is only the author of salvation for the many sons whom he will bring to glory (10).

*A merciful and faithful high priest*

One great privilege of salvation is that when we become Christians, we are brought into the family of God, and the Lord Jesus is not ashamed to call us *brethren* (11). We were given to Christ by God the Father (13; cp. John 6:37; 17:2,11,24) before the world was made (Ephesians 1:4).

Jesus came into the world to *destroy the works of the devil* (1 John 3:8). He did this through dying on the cross and rising from the grave. He took human flesh and through his death destroyed *him who had the power of death, that is, the devil* (14). The word ‘destroy’ does not mean that Satan was blotted out of existence, but that he has been robbed of his power. Death could not hold the Lord Jesus in its dark prison; he burst apart its bars (Acts 2:24). The believer has no need to fear death which has lost its sting; our bodies will be raised incorruptible and immortal when Jesus comes again (15; 1 Corinthians 15:51–57).

Are you puzzled by verse 16? It means that the Lord Jesus does not save the angels who sinned but ‘*the seed of Abraham*’ (that is, all God’s people from both Old Testament and New Testament dispensations, Galatians 3:29). Jesus died *to make propitiation for the sins of the people* (17; that is, by his death he has turned God’s holy wrath away from us by being punished in our place). What amazing grace! The holy Son of God died for us, the guilty ones, to save us, to free us from the fear of death, to bring us to glory (10).

If you are battling with temptation or trial, be encouraged that the Lord Jesus came into the world. He came into the world, being *made a little lower than the angels*, to die for sinners (9) and to be *a merciful and faithful High Priest* (17). He knew the most intense temptation, but he did not sin (4:15). **He knows how we feel because he became a man, and he is able to help us because he is God.** Stuart Olyott writes, ‘If we have Christ, we have everything; if we forsake him, we have nothing — that is the message of the Epistle to the Hebrews!’ (I WISH SOMEONE WOULD EXPLAIN HEBREWS TO ME!, page 32).

*Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession*

Notice how these Hebrew Christians are addressed, ‘*Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling*’ (1). Every Christian belongs to a holy brotherhood. To be holy is to be separated from sin to God. We are sharers in a glorious calling from heaven which leads us to glory. When we remember our great privileges in Christ, we are less likely to be discouraged and more inclined to persevere in our Christian pilgrimage.

The word ‘*therefore*’ in the letters of the New Testament is a link word which leads us to the application of the teaching of the previous verses (cp. 2:1,17). The chapter opens with this word to point us to the Lord Jesus and to apply what we have read about him in chapter 2. The writer has already described the greatness of Christ’s atoning work (2:9–10, 14–18) and he now urges us, ‘*Therefore ... consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus*’ (1). There is much encouragement to be gained from fixing our minds on the Lord Jesus, who is our merciful and faithful High Priest. He is able and willing to help us when we struggle with temptations and trials (2:17–18).

Moses is highly revered by the Jews. Like Moses the Lord Jesus was faithful, but he is greater than Moses. The word ‘*apostle*’ means ‘one who is sent’. Moses was sent by God to deliver Israel from Egypt and to be the Lawgiver, but the Lord Jesus is superior to Moses in his apostleship. Moses was part of the house of God, but Christ is the builder of that house. He is God (3–4). Moses was a faithful servant in the house of God, but the Lord Jesus is a Son over the house (5–6). The Son is greater than the servant.

How is Christ ‘*the Apostle and High Priest of our confession*’? ‘As the apostle he speaks to us from God, as our high priest he speaks for us to God’ (A.W. Pink). How do we know that we truly belong to God’s house, to God’s family? By persevering to the end of our earthly pilgrimage (6; ‘*if we hold fast*’). **We are ‘partakers of the heavenly calling’ (1). Let us live as those who are pilgrims bound for heaven.**