

UNLOCKING HEBREWS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Imagine a disaffected employee being called into the manager's office. His manager has just received this employee's notice to quit, but since the firm doesn't want to lose this person, the manager's been instructed by Head Office to do all in his power to keep the services of this particular employee. To do that, he may offer an increase in pay or even a promotion. He's sure to emphasize the benefits to the employee in staying where he is.

These benefits may take the form of a top-of-the-range company car, a generous health care package or a very good holiday allowance, and on top of all that he may be told that there're career opportunities this company can give him which no rival company can ever hope to match. Ultimately, it's down to the individual, after weighing it all up. Now think in terms of the Holy Spirit appealing to believers on the Lord Jesus Christ to remain loyal to what they'd been taught: to stay in the place of service and worship into which the Holy Spirit had previously led them - a place agreeing fully of course with the New Testament record of the Apostles' Teaching. An appeal in exactly those terms is found in one of the Bible letters found in the New Testament. It's not the most popular letter perhaps; I've even heard it described as 'the forgotten letter' of the New Testament. It's the letter written to the Hebrews - in other words to some of the very first Christians who were, of course, Jewish.

But why should these early Jewish Christians have considered leaving behind the local Christian church fellowships which are referred to so many times on the pages of the New Testament as ‘the Church of God at some place or other’ – for example, at Corinth? Why on earth would they want to leave? To answer that, we’re going to need to transport ourselves back into the time of the New Testament.

The very first followers of Jesus Christ had come out of Judaism. For generation after generation, they’d been brought up to follow the Law and teaching of Moses. It’d been, of course, God’s teaching for his people – delivered to them by Moses, but it was from God. But that Law was never intended to be an end in itself. Its purpose was to prepare the nation of Israel for their Messiah. Another reason the Law served was to show to the people how terrible sin in the human heart is – but that, too, in turn served only to underline their need for the Messiah God was going to send them.

Then the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and his chosen apostles, over against this religious and cultural background, declared to the nation of Israel that he, Jesus of Nazareth, was in fact the Promised One, their long-expected Messiah. But human thought is generally at odds with God’s thoughts, and so when Jesus came to his own people even with all his miraculous credentials, they – his own people – did not receive him (John 1:11). But some did receive him, and to them he gave the right to become children of God through their believing in his name (John 1:12). From these the first disciples were formed.

Now Matthew is the first of the Gospel accounts, and it's usually accepted that this was written, in the first instance, for a Jewish audience. Why? Because it has a dozen or so significant quotations taken from the Old Testament, and which span the life of Jesus on earth, all impressively relating the expectations of the Law to their fulfilment in Jesus Christ – including his death on the cross and well-attested resurrection. If you like, just as the city of Istanbul stands astride the two continents of Europe and Asia, so Matthew's Gospel stands like a bridge connecting the Old and New Testaments.

Many Jews made the cross-over; but a great many, including many of their leaders, didn't. They held fast to the old ways of Judaism, and regarded Christianity as a sect. Their attitude was hostile to this new faith, just as we see in the example of Saul of Tarsus before his famous conversion on the road to Damascus. As we read the very first history book of Christianity, called 'the Acts of the Apostles' in the New Testament, we read how the Christian faith spread outwards from Jerusalem, its spreading flames fanned by persecution; and soon we're reading of multitudes of Jews professing Jesus as Messiah and following him by keeping to the teaching of the Apostles – which, of course, was Jesus' very own teaching.

But Judaism was not a comfortable cradle for Christianity. A young person embracing Jesus by faith as the Messiah might be driven from his or her home. Neighbours zealous for the old ways might destroy the possessions of Christians living near them. Many were hounded and persecuted and fled for their lives. All this was under God's control, of course. Fleeing Christians spread the good news of forgiveness of sins to all who be-

lieved in Jesus Christ as the one whom all the Old Testament prophets had pointed forward to (Acts 10:43). The rejection of Christianity by the Jews nationally, was a key part of God's master-plan to bring the same good news to the Gentile world – and so Christianity spread further into Europe and Asia, as it then was.

Some of those early Jewish converts, who'd doubtless graced some of the very first New Testament churches of God about which we read so much in the New Testament, after a while, began to struggle. The pressures on them were great. Their situation reminds us of the parable of the Sower told by the Lord Jesus. Do you remember his reference to the seed which fell on rocky ground where there was only a thin depth of soil? As a result, the plant had little by way of roots, and shrivelled up when exposed to the heat of the sun. By the time we come to the letter to the Hebrews, near to the back of our Bibles, it's already clear that some of these Jewish Christians were feeling the heat.

Under conditions of intense persecution, sometimes involving an acute separation from close family members, returning to their roots in Judaism must've seemed like an attractive proposition to some of these Hebrew Christians, for it would mean being reconciled with unconverted family members. Attractive as that might've been, however; the cost was also immense. For to draw back in that way, was to turn their back on Jesus, recant their professed faith in him as the Messiah, and reject the Apostles' Teaching which up until then they'd been following.

This then was the choice facing them: either to return and re-immense themselves in mainstream Judaism; or to remain separate

from it, and stay loyal to the separated New Testament community of churches of God where each individual disciple could be described as being ‘companions of a rejected Messiah’ (Hebrews 1:9; 3:14).

The letter to the Hebrews then is a letter containing five major warnings directed to people like that. And the structure of the letter around these five warnings centres around a very distinctive disclosure which the Holy Spirit makes to these Christians who were under pressure, and whose loyalty to the Apostles’ Teaching was being tested to breaking point. It’s a disclosure, a revelation, which features in no less than six of the chapters of this letter (see chapters 3,4,6,9,10 and 12). You see, to dissuade them from the error of allowing themselves to be attracted back to the comforting rituals of Judaism, the Holy Spirit discloses for the first and only time on the pages of Scripture an absolutely breath-taking revelation, one that’s seemingly calculated to present the highest possible appeal not to fall away from service in churches of God.

We used the illustration at the beginning of this chapter of a business manager aiming to persuade an employee to remain loyal to the company by spelling out the distinctive opportunities which the company offered – and which couldn’t be matched anywhere else. I hope we can now see the relevance of that. Through the writer of this letter, the Holy Spirit presents teaching designed to bring about a greater appreciation of this truly outstanding privilege – declared then to be a feature of those churches which were loyal to the Apostles’ Teaching. As elsewhere in the New Testament, this community of local churches is viewed collectively – among other things – as the house of

God. And the disclosure? Well, it's this: that being part of the spiritual dwelling-place of God on this earth brings with it the astounding privilege of actually being able to draw near and enter into God's presence in heaven! But, and I want to emphasize this, it means to do this collectively as the people of God together, viewed here as a priesthood – one answering to the family of Aaron the priest in the time of Moses.

Now, at first, we may not register just how distinctive an honour this is. For each living member of the Body of Christ is surely able to experience the presence of God in their lives – and of course that's true. Praise the Lord for it! But this disclosure in Hebrews of a specific entry into God's presence within a heavenly sanctuary – an entry performed by a people together who're actively serving the Lord according to his will in Scripture – this has simply got to be different, far beyond a single believer's day to day experience. Or else this dramatic appeal to the original recipients of this letter two thousand years ago would lose all its impact.

For even those of them who did end up walking out of the first New Testament churches of God at that time would always remain members of the Church which is Christ's Body. But they'd miss out on this awesome privilege – that's the point – the privilege which is spoken about here precisely in terms of those who remained true to the Apostles' Teaching and did not return to the Law of Moses. The modern context of Christianity is rather different, at least for many of us. It's almost as if many 'brands' of Christianity have come about, and the believer seeking guidance can seem like a consumer in the marketplace. In this series we want to apply the lesson of the Holy Spirit's appeal then: where

can we find a clear grasp of this distinct privilege, and how does practising it relate to the original mould of Christianity?

CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRST WARNING – DON'T NEGLECT (HEBREWS 2:1-3)

Someone I've recently come to know, has in the past year or so received the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. I can judge how real an experience this has been for him because I have the privilege of listening to him addressing God in heartfelt worship. What's interesting is that this was someone who, together with his wife, had been associated for some seventeen years prior to this with a well-known religious organisation which denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God – at least in the generally accepted evangelical understanding of that term.

What led up to the change? Well, in studying through John's Gospel, he came to chapter 20, to the point where Thomas stands before the resurrected Jesus as he again appeared to the disciples in the upper room at Jerusalem which was their hide-out at this critical time. One week before, Thomas, as we know, had already doubted the reality of Jesus' resurrection. He'd demanded proof: physical evidence of it. Now here was Jesus' graciously responding to his request, inviting Thomas to come forward and actually put his finger into the nail wounds in Jesus' hands. At this, all Thomas' doubts dissolve, and he addresses Jesus: 'My Lord and my God!' The issue was settled for Thomas.

And that's what settled it for my friend too. You see, he'd also been reading in the last chapter of the Bible where the apostle John falls down before an angel, only for the angel to command

him to get up, telling John that he, too, is a servant of God just like John. That makes for quite a contrast with Thomas' experience, wouldn't you agree? In the Bible book of Revelation, an angel refuses to receive worship; but in John chapter 20, Jesus does accept the worshipful acknowledgement of his divinity from Thomas. Thomas was not rebuked for addressing Jesus as God in breathless worship, but John was prevented from offering worship to a mere angel.

This shows how wrong it is to believe in Jesus as being one and the same as the archangel, Michael; or otherwise to consider him as the first created spirit being or angel. All angels are created beings; whereas Jesus Christ is the Creator. The first chapter of Hebrews makes abundantly clear the difference between God's Son, Jesus, and the angels. Really, there's no excuse for anyone still continuing to teach the error which had enslaved my friend for so long. To see that, let's refer briefly to the dramatic contrast of Hebrews chapter one:

“And of the angels He says, “Who makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire? But of the Son He says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of his kingdom” (Hebrews 1:7-8).

In making this all-important distinction between the angels of God and the Son of God – that's Jesus Christ - notice how Jesus, the Son, is addressed by the Father as 'God'. The Father calls the Son 'God'. It's hopelessly naive to try to make any mileage out of the fact that the Bible doesn't contain the word 'trinity'. The only issue is: does the Bible identify the Son and the Holy Spirit as

being equally God? The answer to that question is a resounding ‘yes’! Father, Son and Holy Spirit: One God in three persons. I wish I could say more about this, but we need to keep on course with our look at the opening chapter of Hebrews – a chapter which shows the infinite gulf between Christ and angels: it’s the gulf between created beings and the great Creator himself. The Son of God is vastly superior to angels: that’s the whole point of the first section of the letter to the Hebrews. And so now we come to the reason why the opening has stressed this point so conclusively. It comes at the very beginning of chapter 2:

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard” (Hebrews 2:1-3).

These words form the first of the five major warnings around which this entire letter is structured. In the last chapter we were sketching the historical background to this letter. Basically, what we said was: that this letter was written to persuade early Jewish Christians to hold fast to the teaching of the Apostles and so retain their place in the local units of Christian testimony which throughout the New Testament are referred to as Churches of God. They’d been experiencing persecution and so were coming under extreme pressure to return to the old ways of Judaism, and so go back to all the ceremonies and rituals of the Law of Moses,

from which the Lord's teaching - see Acts chapter 15 for example - had set them free.

In the giving of that Law, the Law of Moses, the Hebrews were reminded that God had spoken through angels. This seems to have been a common enough Jewish understanding, although it's really something that's only clarified for us when we get to the pages of the New Testament (Galatians 3:19). But it's an essential point in the argument here: that the word of the Law was spoken through angels. And if anyone broke the Law they could expect punishment: in fact, a number of sins carried the death penalty, when at the mouth of two or three witnesses the law-breaker would be put to death by stoning.

The writer to the Hebrews then reminds them that the word of their salvation had at the first been spoken to them by the Lord Jesus, God's Son - and later his teaching had become the teaching of his Apostles. But the key point was that it had first been spoken by the Son of God himself. And this was the teaching they were threatening to abandon, and give up on. So this is where the build-up of the previous chapter assumes vital importance. Remember that's where the vast superiority of God's Son over the created order of angelic beings was so thoroughly established. And so if Jesus, the Son, is superior to angels, and if failure to keep the Law which had been spoken through angels had been a punishable offence; then they should be under no illusions whatsoever that it was far more serious to turn away from teaching which had first being spoken by the Son of God himself.

By as much as the Son is greater than the angels; by so much is the guilt of falling away from teaching spoken by the Son greater than the guilt of falling away from teaching spoken through angels (as the Law had been). We're talking here about falling away from teaching – teaching which found its full expression in the early, biblical churches of God. But I want you to be very clear about what we're not saying: we're not saying anyone can fall away from salvation – and neither does the Hebrews letter say this. Salvation is totally secure – it can't be made any more sure than it already is – because it doesn't depend on us, but only upon God and the once for all finished work of Christ.

Not everyone agrees with that, I know. But the fact they disagree doesn't alter the truth of it as being the Bible's clear teaching. I understand why some people have a different view. And Hebrews is one of the main Bible texts they use. No-one would dispute that it does indeed describe the very real danger of 'falling away'. But instead of that thought troubling us in relation to our eternal security – and leaving us to puzzle over a contradiction with other parts of the Bible (like John 10:28) – I want to share with you exactly what it was that those early believers were in danger of falling away from.

Some of those Hebrews who had become Christians must've been under intense pressure from their Jewish families to renounce their professed new-found faith in Jesus as the Messiah. As a result some wanted out – wanted out of the churches of God in which Christians were then associated, as recorded in the New Testament. God's purpose for these Hebrews, and the privileges associated with the 'little flock', seemed to have lost its appeal for them. It seems they'd begun to think that living as a

Christian compared unfavourably after all with living as a Jew like their fathers had done. The writer to the Hebrews is appealing to them not to turn back, not to drift away, not to come short of God's purpose in their lives of service among God's people.

This is precisely because these first century Jewish believers were in danger of falling away from their place in New Testament churches of God by deciding to return to Judaism. To do that would bring about high-profile damage to the Christian testimony. This was serious – and so that's why we have the repeated severe warnings found in Hebrews. The warning here is not about rejecting salvation – far less losing it - but it's about neglecting it – by neglecting the obligations and responsibilities it brings with it, which we should not fall away from. What this points up for us is the fact that we've been saved for a purpose.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SECOND WARNING – ENTER GOD’S REST (HEBREWS 3:7- 4:16)

When a footballer gets a second caution or warning, that’s when the yellow card becomes a red card, and the offending player must leave the field of play. In this chapter we come to the second warning – the second of five specific warnings – which form the backbone to the letter to the Hebrews, as the writer, by the Spirit of God, repeatedly warns these early Jewish Christians not to turn their back on the place that was theirs among the local Christian testimonies known throughout the New Testament as Churches of God. Whatever they did, they could never lose their salvation; but if they went back to practising Judaism, they would, of course, lose out on the privileges which their place of Christian service among the New Testament churches brought them. The writer of this Bible letter to the Hebrews is at great pains to show them this is a very serious step, and should they decide to take it, they would lose out on a very great deal – not to mention incurring God’s displeasure.

With the second warning, the same thing happens as with the first - there’s a build-up to it. In this case, the build-up – contained in chapter 2 of the letter - concerns the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, who is himself God, became like us. And became like us both to save us and also to qualify as our priest, being the one who represents us to God. The Lord became man not only

to save those who believe, but also so that believers could have a settled lifestyle in God's house. The argument of Hebrews chapter one has shown Jesus to be greater than any angel, and now the argument at the beginning of chapter 3, proves him to be greater than Moses. It goes without saying that the nation to which these Hebrews belonged by birth held Moses in the very highest esteem, but despite that - in their history - they, or strictly speaking their forefathers - had both doubted God's word through Moses and also gone on to put it to the test. The appeal now being made to them was: Jesus is far greater than Moses - so surely they wouldn't go one worse than their fathers and doubt God's Word through him?

Moses had led their forefathers out of Egypt and then had to put up with their grumblings and murmurings in the desert. However, it was Joshua, his successor, who'd brought them into the Promised Land. There, even the second generation of Israelites failed to enter into settled enjoyment of all God had provided. That was sad news for them; but the good news for us today is that an opportunity still exists of enjoying a spiritually settled lifestyle in the Place which God's will appoints - and appreciating its glorious privileges is the key to it. These Hebrews had lost sight of the glories of God's spiritual house on earth - and that's what was making them restless.

It's the beginning of Hebrews chapter 3 which introduces us to the subject of God's house on earth: the tabernacle of Moses' day, and its successors, but it also links that with the service of a people enjoying God's rest. We might well ask: 'what is the rest of God that's referred to in the Bible - and here in particular?' It's important at this point to make the connection between God's

rest and God's people. Notice how Hebrews 4:9 says: "There remains therefore a rest for the people of God". And it's at this point that the writer to the Hebrews moves on from the experience of Israel, God's Old Testament people, to the Holy Spirit's application of this same truth to a people today who, as God's New Testament people, share in the privileges of the spiritual house and kingdom of God too. The early verses of chapter 4 of Hebrews, says, "since a promise remains of entering [God's] rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it".

'Rest', here, is really 'resting down' in the sense of a settled remaining – which at once gives it a relevance in view of the many, different, potential 'homes' for a Christian's service today. And considering how many Christians today move from group to group and from 'church' to 'church', this warning carries a fresh challenge! – reminding us that God's purpose is for us to be really settled in Christian life and service – in the place where he himself has settled down, as shown by his Word.

The second major warning in Hebrews, occupying most of chapters 3 and 4, is against just such a failure to enter into God's rest – where we've seen 'entering in' means recognising, and progressively enjoying, the spiritually settled life-style of the people of God in our day too. In other words, we're warned against failing to 'enter into' God's rest of settled and undistracted service in God's own appointed place. For God's Old Testament people, Israel, that place for them was in the Promised Land, but they failed even to take possession of large areas of the land that was promised to them. That only reflected their unsettled spiritual experience. But then came a fresh appeal in Psalm 95, appealing for a change for the better. "Today," God pleaded, "if you will

hear [My] voice, do not harden your hearts". The appeal found a response through king David when he brought up the Ark of God to Jerusalem - its ultimate resting place, now that the nation was settled in the land. And for a short while then they fulfilled God's purpose for a people at rest in his purposes.

But soon the same old problem plagued them: the problem being the creeping, collective, spiritual disease of hardness of heart – in other words, an increasing insensitivity to the Word and will of God, coupled with a weakening of their devotion. This, in turn, was diagnosed as resulting from their unbelief and disobedience. What this second warning highlights is this: that God really looks for his people to be continually entering into the glories of his house, over which Jesus Christ is son. Hebrews 3, verses 5 & 6 say:

“Moses was faithful in all [God’s] house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over [God’s] house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.”

Appreciating the glories of God’s house, while enjoying and participating in its privileges is the only way to a spiritually settled lifestyle in Gods earthly house: whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. We’ve no need to hold fast to our salvation, as we made clear last time; but on at least three occasions in this short section of God’s Word there’s mention of ‘holding fast’ in connection with a place in God’s house. Hold fast to what? To our confidence and to our hope. But what confidence is this? And what hope is this? We

can only be sure of the answers if we read them out of the surrounding context of this Hebrews letter. So come with me to a confidence mentioned later in chapter 10, where verse 19 says: “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.”

Notice the confidence mentioned there is in relation to a people – in fact a worshipping people - entering into the holy place in heaven above, while worshipping God through service that’s associated with God’s house on earth. We’ll check that out further in this series, but for the moment, we need to explore what the hope is that those who remain in God’s house are warned to hold fast to. That brings us to chapter 6, and once again it’s verse 19: “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil”.

Obviously, there’s a common theme there which confirms we’re on the right track by letting the same words as defined later in the letter clarify what Hebrews chapter 3 and verse 6 is really saying. This gives us more than a glimpse of where this series is heading. We’re onto something big here! Those Christians who’re associated with God’s house on earth can at times in their service actually draw near collectively and can, in a spiritual sense, access the inner sanctuary of the heavenly temple where God himself is seated – and which provided the pattern for the tabernacle Moses built on this earth long ago.

Those Hebrews with their Jewish background, knew all about that former, physical house for God on earth. The writer appeals to them not to be drawn back to the glory of those by-gone days, for theirs was now a far greater privilege in terms of the spiri-

tual house comprised of the New Testament churches of God. A far greater privilege for sure, because of this spiritual linkage with the heavenly reality itself – the tabernacle in the desert etc had only been mere copies of this same reality in heaven. If they could only grasp this, they wouldn't consider leaving and returning to Judaism. Judaism had only ever been connected with copies: but their current service involved entering into the reality itself. To be settled and undistracted, in the place of God's will for them as Christians, depended on them getting hold of this glorious truth disclosed here.

The picture language of the Old Testament anticipated the Lord Jesus dying and, in resurrection, entering into the true holy place in heaven. And when the high priest of Israel went through the Tabernacle veil on the Day of Atonement he did so with two handfuls of incense, the Bible symbol of prayer (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-5). That illustrates what we find at the end of Hebrews chapter 4 where God's people are now invited to 'draw near' in prayer (Hebrews 4:15-16): 'let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.'

Referring back to that solemn Day of Atonement, two handfuls of incense, which David in his psalms linked with prayer, were taken right into 'the Holiest of All', weren't they? And the high priest then was acting for the whole people of God, not just on behalf of any individual. That's consistent with the disclosure made here in Hebrews. Individual exercise in prayer is a precious privilege, but the indication here is that the people of God, when together in prayer - in some sense - penetrate further!

CHAPTER FOUR: THE THIRD WARNING – DON'T FALL AWAY (HEBREWS 5:11-6:20)

Imagine an appeal to believers on the Lord Jesus Christ to remain loyal to what they've been taught, and to stay in the place of service and worship into which the Holy Spirit has led them - a place fully agreeing with the New Testament record of the Apostles' Teaching, of course. An appeal exactly like that is found in one of the Bible letters belonging to the New Testament. It's the letter to the Hebrews. But why should these early Jewish Christians even consider leaving behind the local Christian church fellowships which are referred to so many times on the pages of the New Testament as 'the Church of God at some place or other' – for example, at Corinth?

Well, returning to their roots in Judaism must have seemed like an attractive proposition to those who were under extreme persecution. But, attractive as it might have been, the cost was also great. For to fall away from the early Christian community, with its new covenant way of service, was to turn their back on Jesus as being the Messiah, and it would also mean rejecting the Apostles' Teaching. This then was the choice facing them: either to fall away from their distinctively Christian service and return to mainstream Judaism; or to stay loyal to the separated New Testament community of churches of God. And the appeal to stay also contained warnings about leaving.

In fact, the letter to the Hebrews contains five major warnings – warnings about the consequences of falling away from the New Testament expression of Christianity and returning to Judaism – and in this chapter we’ll be considering the third of those warnings. And, if I may remind you, these warnings centre around a very distinctive disclosure which the Holy Spirit makes to these Christians whose loyalty to the Apostles’ Teaching was being tested to breaking point. The Holy Spirit discloses for the first and only time on the pages of Scripture an absolutely breathtaking revelation, one that’s seemingly calculated to present the highest possible appeal to them not to fall away from service in churches of God. But more on that later...

You see, chapter 5 of Hebrews begins by talking about the Lord Jesus Christ in his role and office as high priest. This is a major theme of this letter, and it’s only here that we find direct teaching about the ministry of the Lord Jesus as high priest today – one reason, by the way, why this is probably the greatest teaching letter in our Bibles. Teaching about Jesus as high priest is precious teaching – and it’s teaching which draws upon the imagery of the Old Testament. As a result, it demands some familiarity with the service of God in Israel back then. So, perhaps, for that reason this Bible letter doesn’t seem as popular as others. But I want to urge you to get into Hebrews, for there’s really good news for believers here!

It’s not easy, as we say, but studying Hebrews will richly repay the effort you make. Even for Jewish Christians familiar with the old way of serving God, it wasn’t always easy to grasp these things, for the writer says in Chapter 5 verse 11-12:

“Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”

Let’s ask the Lord to take away our dullness in hearing as we come to its pages. That part of the warning could easily apply to a lot of us today. Perhaps there’s a tendency to want to paddle in the shallows, instead of letting the Holy Spirit guide us out into the deeper teaching of God’s Word? If, two thousand years after the time when this letter was written, we’re to truly value the good news for believers that’s found in the original mold of Christianity, then we’ll also need to come to a mature appreciation of Jesus as high priest. In fact, the writer says exactly that at the beginning of Hebrews chapter 6 verse 1: “leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.”

This is a timely warning: now as well as then. While serving as a community of Christians, there are – as this chapter calls them – ‘things that accompany salvation’ (6:9). Things connected with an understanding of the priesthood of the Lord Jesus, and his current service in heaven on behalf of believers on earth whose gatherings are in accordance with what the Bible teaches. There’s an attitude which says: ‘salvation is the only important thing – speak about the Saviour, and let’s see people saved.’ That’s excellent, as far as it goes. But what about those things which God’s designed - and which the Holy Spirit describes here as ‘things that accompany salvation’? If we take this warning seriously – and it’s the third in Hebrews – we’ll allow the Holy Spirit to

teach us what knowing Jesus as high priest should mean for our collective Christian worship. Certainly, the Father wants us to be his worshippers, once we're saved from sin's penalty.

The writer says he wanted his readers to 'realize the full assurance of hope until the end' (Hebrews 6:11). Now what does that mean? In warning them against falling away from a worshipping Christian community – one that's faithfully following the New Testament pattern - he encourages them instead to be fully assured of the hope that was central to their service, a hope bound up with Jesus in his role as high priest. It was a case of either falling away or being fully assured. If they were fully assured, they wouldn't fall away. Remember, 'falling away' is not from a salvation which is all of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9) – how could that be? It could never be! Quite impossible! In the historical context of this letter, the falling away was from a place of active service in the New Testament churches if any of these Hebrew Christians should decide to go back to the old way of serving God within Judaism.

So as to be fully assured, and not to fall away, these Hebrews were encouraged to take hold of the hope set before them like those who'd previously shown patience under trial: the classic example being Abraham who held by faith to the hope that was promised to him. We read in verses 13-18:

“... when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself saying, “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you. For men swear by one greater {than themselves} and with them an oath {given} as confir-

mation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things [that's the promise and the oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us."

The promised blessing of Abraham, assured by God's oath, had come to them, as it has come down the years to us too, as believers in Christ Jesus. We're included as 'heirs of the promise'. But what's this hope set before us which we've to lay hold of? Is it the hope of the Lord's coming? Or the hope of an inheritance reserved in heaven for us? No! Let the writer explain in verses 19 and 20:

"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a {hope} both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (NASB).

The writer has drawn their attention – and ours too - to the long-promised blessing that was to be given through Abraham. God's now fulfilled his promise in Jesus Christ. He's not only a living Saviour, but he's a priestly intercessor. In resurrection, he's entered through the veil into God's very presence in heaven so that he might bring a worshipping people in there too. But if we don't lay hold on that hope, there's the very real danger of coming short of realizing this in our experience. This is another men-

tion of the same hope we've been introduced to before in the letter to the Hebrews. Remember? Hebrews 3:6: "but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end."

If some can fall way from God's house on earth, then it stands to reason that the house of God and the Body of Christ are not the same – it further follows that the house of God is not every living Christian. The privilege of having a place in the house of God belongs to the category of 'things which accompany salvation'. If we don't distinguish what's meant by the house of God from the Body of Christ - the body of all believers - then falling away can only be from one's salvation – but since that cannot be – then the house of God was ever only those who hold fast to the Apostles' Teaching – which is, remember, exactly what these Hebrews were being urged to do: to hold fast.

So the appeal to these early Hebrew Christians was to hold fast to this hope which the end of Hebrews chapter 6 has explained. We might ask: 'Who would want to forfeit their place in a biblical church of God if, on the basis of God's clear Word, this hope of entering into the actual Holy of holies in heaven was theirs?' This is certainly the thrilling disclosure which shows how much better the new way of service is. What about you? Have you seen this revelation? This hope of entering the immediate presence of God is not about God coming to be with us down here, but what's disclosed is that the biblically defined people of God in some spiritual sense enter the place in heaven which corresponds to the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle or temple copies seen on earth long ago – and it's a present experience in our collective ser-

vice for those who're holding fast. I must say, I find it hard not to say 'WOW'!

CHAPTER FIVE: THE FOURTH WARNING – HOLD FAST (HEBREWS 10:19-39)

Perhaps the most instructive section of the Hebrews letter is from chapter 7 through 10. It's there we read of the puzzling, intriguing figure of Melchizedek. Elsewhere, in the Bible, he appears only briefly in Genesis chapter 14 where he meets Abraham and blesses him after his rescue of his nephew, Lot. He's someone who seems to walk in and out of the Bible unannounced and without background information. It's only when we get to Hebrews chapter 7 that we can begin to appreciate why that should be the case. He's being presented to us as a picture, or type, of the Lord Jesus, who's a high priest for ever.

We're told "this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him ... remains a priest perpetually" (Hebrews 7:1-3). All biographical data concerning this historical figure has been kept from us in the biblical record. What this means is that he appears to be 'without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life' (v.3). Obviously, he did have a father, but we're given no information in the Bible about him, so that – quite intentionally – Melchizedek appears as someone 'without [a] father'. And the same applies to the other things said about him. All because he's picturing for us the Son of God who as God had no mother, and in becoming man, had no earthly father; neither did he have

any beginning of his existence, for – being God, the Creator - he always existed.

But the main point in Hebrews chapter 7 is to impress upon us the fact that Jesus' priesthood is so much better than the priesthood of Aaron and subsequent high priests in Israel long ago. Each of them died, and were succeeded by a son. But, by contrast, Melchizedek is presented so as to appear to be a priest perpetually – he's a priest when we first read about him, and he exits from view still as a priest. Unlike Aaron whose death we read about. The priesthood of Jesus is of the Melchizedek type because he remains a priest forever and that's why 'He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them' (v.25).

Ah, there we get another reminder of the thrilling idea we're pursuing throughout this entire letter to the Hebrews – the disclosure of how it's possible for God's people today to draw near to God, to actually enter spiritually into heaven itself while still living here on earth. The actual mechanics of this or perhaps better, the realization of this, requires the Lord Jesus to function in heaven on their behalf in his capacity as eternal high priest. The Biblical Christian writers didn't write about God coming down to meet them in their church gatherings, but about how they, as God's people, ascended spiritually into God's presence above. (Yes, I know Matthew 18 talks about the Lord in their midst, but that's not in a church gathering context - it's when two or three are met together for the business of sorting out church disciplinary matters).

Chapter 8 continues, and intensifies, the focus on Jesus as high priest in the heavens. In contrast to the earthly priests of Israel's past who served among tabernacle and temple, the Lord's sphere of service is in connection with the heavenly things which served as the model for these mere earthly counterparts. So you see, this clarifies – it confirms – that the actual setting for the gatherings of God's people in their spiritual worship is a heavenly one – one which enters into this hidden realm of things as they draw near through their high priest. I hope you agree with me that this really is a thrilling disclosure; one that should prevent our service becoming seemingly mundane and ordinary.

It's the highest privilege of our lives to engage in the things of which this letter has so much to say. Privilege like this comes with responsibility, of course – which is why there're so many specific warnings which are like the backbone of this Hebrews' letter – and of this book. And if anyone should persist in thinking the way we serve God is something we can decide for ourselves, don't forget God struck down two of Aaron's priestly sons who preferred to do things their way (Leviticus 10) – and their service was only surrounded by the copies of the actual realities which are involved in the new covenant service of the people of God, service which is according to the New Testament pattern. We need to be so much more careful, even although it is the 'day of grace', because we're invited to serve among spiritual realities above.

The superiority of that new covenant is the next theme taken up, leading us on into chapter 9 of Hebrews - which surely has to be one of the most detailed chapters of amazing teaching anywhere in the Bible. The furniture of the tabernacle of Moses' day

is itemised as serving as a detailed parable for our service now, and the ritual of the annual Day of Atonement in Israel fills the rest of chapter nine. This was the one day in Israel's calendar year when the people who were recognized as the people of God at that time engaged in a very solemn and significant ritual based around the ceremonial cleansing of the tabernacle.

This was the one time each year when anyone – and it could only be the high priest – could enter into the second tabernacle compartment, the sanctuary behind the veil – or curtain - where the ark of the covenant was located, the compartment known as the holy of holies. Only he could enter, and only then, and only with the blood of goats and bulls as specified in Leviticus chapter 16. But listen to this: verse 8 in Hebrews 9 says: “The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed”. The ‘not yet’ applied to the days before Christ's coming. But I want to say again: we're living in the days when this out-of-this-world disclosure applies, and is in force.

We often – and rightly – emphasize in teaching the wonderful disclosure of Matthew chapter 16 and Ephesians chapter 2 concerning the Church the Body of Christ – and how it's made up in this age of all true believers on the Lord Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, whether dead or alive. But do we give enough attention to this complementary disclosure regarding the operation of God's house? The key insight - shared here amid all the imagery of the great Old Testament object lesson or parable which was the tabernacle, and the annual Day of Atonement ritual centred around it – is that God's people today can enter into the immediate presence of God in their collective worship.

This is what answers to the limited access God's Old Testament people had in tabernacle days. They only ever drew near and entered in representatively in the solitary person of their appointed high priest. But our high priest being of the order of Melchizedek is so much better, and the new covenant service so vastly superior, that all of God's people today enter into the actual heavenly counterpart of the holy of holies long ago. You see, Jesus, our high priest entered in resurrection and ascension as a forerunner. And it's God's design that we follow him in today, into where he's already gone in for us, as we engage together in service for God in accordance with the biblical pattern. The way into the holy place has been disclosed! And what a disclosure, for the holy place is the true holy place in heaven itself!

We've spoken of the Lord entering ahead of us as a forerunner. We should expand on that for some verses in Hebrews 9 are often misunderstood. When verse 11 talks about the appearance of Christ 'through the greater and more perfect tabernacle', some think this is Christ's appearing on earth, and the tabernacle there is a reference to his human body. But a careful reading of what follows – and the wider context – shows it's Christ's appearing in heaven, and a reference to his passage through the courts and compartments of the actual, real tabernacle located in heaven above (see verses 23 and 24). Verse 24 makes it plain: "Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself."

All this is the magnificent build-up to the fourth warning from Hebrews 10:19 to the end of the chapter. In the extended context of the preceding chapters which we've been reviewing, there can now be no mistaking what's been said here – even though

it's something that's so awesome. The original readers of this letter, and those of us today, are warned not to 'throw away [our] confidence' (v.35) by 'shrinking back' (see verses 38 and 39) and 'forsaking our own assembling together' (v.25). Instead, we're to 'hold fast the confession of our hope' (v.23). What hope? What confidence? Let Hebrews 10:19 answer it: "We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart."

Remember, the overall purpose this letter served. It was aimed at securing the allegiance of wavering Jews in the first century Churches of God – Jewish Christians, Hebrews, who were being pressured to return to the fold of Judaism. How could anyone leave the New Testament community of local, interlinked churches of God if they truly grasped what this disclosure meant? They wouldn't dream of going back to the Old Testament shadows, compared to this, surely!

The gold, copper and polished gems of the old ways simply pale into insignificance by contrast. Little wonder the writer urges the need for holding onto their hope (3:6) and their confidence (3:6) if they were to maintain their place in God's house on earth with its corporate access into the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 6:19; 10:19). For, as we've seen already, the particular hope and the specific confidence in question - if we trace these words and what they're linked with in the entirety of this Hebrews letter – we find both the hope and the confidence relate to this spiritual entry into heaven for a serving people, as disclosed here. The revelation of God's house on earth (3:6), and the revelation of spiri-

tual service in the holies above (6:19; 10:19) are twin truths that can only be appreciated together.

CHAPTER SIX: THE FIFTH AND FINAL WARNING – DON'T DROP OUT (HEBREWS 12)

Perhaps you remember school sports days. Usually, the prizes weren't handed out straightaway – but only when all the races were finished. If you'd run well, and were in line for a prize, you still had to watch all the remaining races, and hopefully feel generous enough to cheer the others on. It seems it was like that at the early Olympics too. One Bible expert writes of these 'gymnastic games ... the most imposing form ... was ... presented at Olympia ... where games were celebrated in honour of Jupiter once every five years. An almost incredible multitude, from all the states of Greece and from the surrounding countries, attended these games as spectators. The noblest of the Grecian youths appeared as competitors ... the victors in the morning contests did not receive their prizes till the evening, but, after their exertions, joined the band of spectators'. Why are we mentioning this? Well, it's because we want to come to Hebrews chapter 12 today, which begins like this in verses 1 and 2:

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the

cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Who formed this surrounding cloud of witnesses? Surely it's the list of worthies already mentioned in chapter 11. Men like Abraham, Noah, Moses and many other unnamed heroes of faith. But in what sense were they witnesses? It's attractive (but debatable) to think of 'the ancient worthies whose actions are recorded in Scripture' as now being 'represented as spectators, their deeds, and sufferings, and triumphs, as recorded in Scripture, being calculated to have the same influence on the minds of the believing Hebrews, as the interested [faces]... of the surrounding crowd had on the minds of the [Greek] combatants' – the crowd which had included earlier victors now awaiting their prizes.

Of all the encouraging examples, however, the Lord Jesus is the greatest – called here the chief example (the meaning of 'author') – and now the writer identifies himself with these early Hebrew Christians in the first churches of God and calls upon them to fix their eyes on Jesus. This matter of seeing the Lord is something we'll return to later in our look at this chapter, but it does require the perfecting of holiness in our lives – and that in turn takes discipline. This is the next theme, continuing the imagery of the athlete in training, but blending it with the picture of a child being corrected by its parent. Hebrews 12:4-10 tell us:

“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by him;

for those who the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives ... we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.”

So the discipline we receive is so that we may be trained to share his holiness. We're not to regard it lightly, or faint under it, but allow ourselves to be trained by it. The next verse seems to have in view the limbs of the athlete under training when it says:

“Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:12-14).

The Christian, pictured as an athlete, is encouraged to get with the training program. It's all about how we respond to the discipline that's intended to train us in holiness, or in the sanctification necessary in order for us to see the Lord – to fix our eyes on him, and so to avoid dropping out of the race. Some of these early Jewish Christians were on the verge of dropping out. Taking up the dramatic case of Esau, the writer warns them – and this is now the fifth major warning of the letter – when he warns them of what's at stake if they should abandon the race:

“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears” (Hebrews 12:15-17).

What a price Esau paid for his hasty bargain! He allowed physical gratification which was only for a moment to outweigh a lifetime’s testimony and the right to be an ancestor of the Messiah. These first century Hebrew Christians needed to avoid a similar disaster – would they forfeit the blessings of their spiritual birthright all for the sake of the temporary appeal of Judaism? That would be behaviour every bit as profane as Esau’s. But what special birthright blessing does the writer go on to mention? It’s a blessing he’s been building up to while stressing the need for training or discipline, for it’s a blessing that demands holiness – for this is the blessing of seeing the Lord. But it’s not meaning seeing the Lord when we die, nor even in our quiet times of communion over the Word of God; no, it’s seeing the Lord on Mount Zion while engaged in collective worship as a holy nation for God on this earth. This is a most sacred blessing. Little wonder the writer of this letter to the early Hebrew Christians was so insistent they mustn’t miss out on it by settling for some profane alternative.

Like spiritual athletes they needed holiness training so as to focus on the Lord if they were to be fully aware of this highest privilege of God’s holy nation – which they were viewed as form-

ing across all the New Testament churches of God. The sheer wonder of the privilege is now brought home to them by the writer. He drew on their Jewish Old Testament background. He reminded them of the awesome holiness of Mount Sinai where their forefathers were brought by Moses to meet God.

“For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.” And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling” (Hebrews 12:18-21).

We’re even told something there which we can’t discover from the full story of the event in the book of Exodus – namely that even Moses was intimidated by the experience. And if that historical experience had really been so awesome – and it must have been - how much more awesome is the reality which the Bible describes as the spiritual counterpart to their national experience at Sinai. The writer now emphasizes the contrast:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new

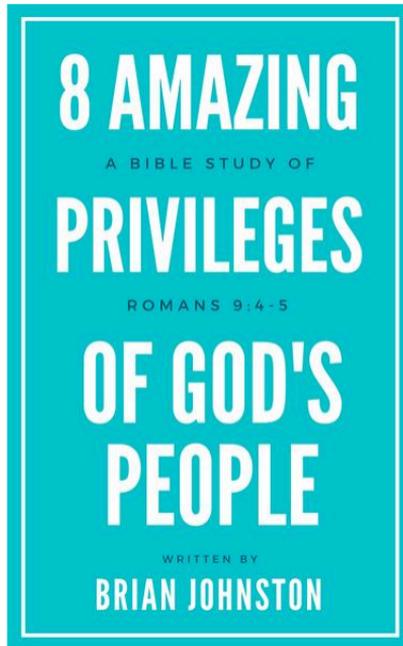
covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24).

There’s so much to take in there that you’ll need to go and look it up for yourself in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 22. What holy boldness is ours through that blood! I say ‘ours’, but we need to check if we really do correspond to those to whom this Bible letter was originally addressed. They were ‘fellows’ of Christ; sharers of a heavenly calling; spoken of as forming God’s earthly house; having received a kingdom. In Christ’s teaching to his disciples we find that it was to them that the kingdom of God was to be transferred; and equally the status of being a holy nation. Elsewhere in the New Testament, disciples of Christ, serving the Lord in churches of God in different localities, but all bound together in the one overall fellowship are described as being a spiritual house, a holy priesthood. When they functioned in this capacity at the breaking of the bread, Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 19 speaks about them as worshipers entering into the holy place, and quite unmistakably in its context, this is somewhere in heaven, and so it’s a spiritual experience which answers to what we’re now looking at in chapter 12.

Well, in this book, we’ve been tracing warning after warning in this letter to the Hebrews – warnings delivered to Jewish Christians who were under pressure to abandon the Messiah they’d embraced by faith – namely Jesus – and turn their backs on the community of New Testament churches of God by returning to the old ways of Judaism again. Alongside the warnings, as we’ve seen, runs an appeal – running right through this letter – which is basically about showing what they’d be missing out on if they fell away from the service of God’s people in these churches.

They would miss out on drawing near to God and entering his presence in heaven while worshipping on earth. Nowhere else in the Bible tells us about this. This is the amazing disclosure contained in the letter to the Hebrews. It's touched on so often there as to be unmistakable. The clear implication is that if our way of service today equates with the same pattern of God's Word, we can claim this promise too!

Did you love *Unlocking Hebrews*? Then you should read *8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans 9:4-5* by Brian Johnston!



The apostle Paul says in Romans 9:4-5: "who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God, Amen."

Perhaps you hadn't noticed this little gem tucked away in the middle of the letter, but it is a tremendous description of what it meant to be among God's people in the past. We are not so much interested in a history lesson, of course, but in seeing to what ex-

tent each of these eight great can find its answer today in our service for God.

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