

JESUS – SON OVER GOD’S HOUSE

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Period or costume dramas make for popular television in countries like the United Kingdom. There's a fascination with an era before society came to know the meaning of equal opportunities for all. These dramas transport viewers back to a time before the phenomenon which is often elsewhere referred to as 'the American Dream'. The idea behind the so-called American dream is that anyone, regardless of their birth status, can run for the highest offices in the land. But there was a time in the western world when the landscape was dominated by grand estates and large houses where those who belonged lived 'upstairs'; and the hired staff very definitely lived 'downstairs' – and were not upwardly mobile.

In a setting like that, the respective roles of a servant and of a son in such a house were worlds apart. I've read of one Bible teacher recalling how, in his high-school days in Montana, he once made a visit to a large cattle ranch on the Missouri River. He was visiting as a friend of one of the cowboy employees. He slept in the bunkhouse with the rest of the paid workers and had no access to the main quarters. He did ride a couple of rather scruffy horses, but was mostly involved in helping his cowboy employee friend do certain assigned chores. Then some time later he again visited the same ranch – but this time as a friend of the ranch-owner's son. What a difference! Now he had the run of the big house, ate in the main dining room, rode the best horses on the ranch and

could go anywhere at any time. He said it made him aware of the huge difference between a son and a servant.

In the letter to the Hebrews, the author wants to talk about this same difference to his readers. But let's be clear: he's talking about the house that is God's house, and in that connection he describes Moses as a servant; while Jesus is the son over this house. His obvious teaching point is that our relationship is not with Moses the servant, but with Jesus, the Son of God who is over God's house. And because Jesus is the son over God's house as opposed to being a servant in it, then it means the very greatest privileges are open to us – certainly far surpassing anything the Law of Moses once offered past generations of God's people.

If we were to study all of this Hebrews' letter, we would discover that, among all the opportunities now open to us as we pursue authentic Christian service today, there is the opportunity to be found engaging with – not just the copies of things in heaven, as Moses did – but with their actual heavenly counterparts! It's little wonder that the author time-and-again contrasts the past era of the Law and its mere shadows with the present era of truly substantial spiritual experiences now on offer through Christ and his cross. What the author begins by calling 'the last days' is, in fact, clearly stated to be the whole time since God visited us in the person of Jesus Christ. And these last days – in which we're so privileged to live – are said by the author, in effect, to be the good times. He talks of the promised 'good things' which have now come to us in these present times through Christ and all that he achieved at the cross.

That's really interesting. The point of this letter is to tell first-century believers that they have never had it so good! The clear message was that none of them should even be considering turning the clock back and wanting to return to 'the good old days of Judaism'. But were 'the good old days' really that good? Even today in society, people generally tend to look back and nostalgically wish for a return to 'the good old days'. It's obviously tempting to think things must have been better in the past, for our present era is full of worries about economic recession, unemployment, terrorism, drug abuse, global warming and large national debts. In our memories, the good old days seemed to have been so much better. The harsh fact is, however, that what we now consider as the 'Good Old Days' had their own hazards and uncertainties. Back then, in the west, we were embroiled in World War II which, according to Wikipedia at least, killed 73 million people. And we were worrying about whether the United States and the Soviet Union were going to start a nuclear war and so end civilization as we knew it, or at very least we were terrified of Communism taking over the world. Yes, the 'Good Old Days' were filled with threats and insecurities just like today. In reality, they exist only in our very selective memories.

In making the claim, that his readers then, and we now, have never had it so good, the author of the Hebrews' letter in our Bible is not relying on any such spurious reasoning. For the grand theme of so much of the letter is that 'Jesus is better'. The word 'better', in fact, is one of the really significant words in the letter – which shows that Jesus is better than the prophets, priests, kings, and angels – even in terms of the comparisons which are found in chapter 1 alone! Jesus, the one who is presented as being bet-

ter, is described as being the Son over God's house in chapter 3 verse 6, and up until that point he's presented to us in at least five ways which relate to that position which he holds over God's house. We will be studying that position in the next chapters of this book. As we reflect on each of these presentations of Christ, our aim will be to see him in a rounded way as the son with authority over God's House.

But first, it would seem appropriate to ask, "What exactly is God's house?" As we say, the writer tells the Hebrew Christians, for whom the letter we have in our Bibles was originally intended, that they are God's house – in fact, linking himself with them, he says 'whose house we are' – and then he adds the condition: 'if we hold fast ...' (Hebrews 3:6). Now that's the point I'd like you to especially notice with me. There's a condition here. This condition is something the writer is going to say a lot about in the rest of the letter. For, he goes on to talk about the danger of 'falling away' – famously, for example, in Hebrews 6:6. There he is very careful to describe those whom he's referring to in at least five ways, each of which convincingly proves that they truly had known new birth. So, now, let me say this very carefully: if God's house is identified as being everyone who has known salvation through faith in Christ, then this 'falling away' by true believers would seem to be a falling away from salvation.

But the Bible does NOT teach that, once saved, we can be lost again. From many different points of view, the Bible very definitely maintains the line of teaching that says 'once saved, always saved.' Therefore, God's house – which Hebrews teaches is conditional – cannot be identified with the vast company of all those who have ever known salvation by God's grace through personal

faith in Jesus Christ, and is, in fact, also to be distinguished even from all currently living believers – once again because of that stated condition in chapter 3, verse 6. All of this shows us that the defining issue for a place in God's house is not the possession of salvation, for although Hebrews tells us we can fall away from God's house, yet we can never be dispossessed of our salvation. There's no need whatsoever for us to hold fast to our salvation, for the Lord Jesus himself holds us fast, and assures us none can snatch us away from him (see John 10:29). But, regarding what's called God's house, we evidently do need to hold fast, just as they did, to whom the author of Hebrews wrote some two thousand years ago.

All those who have ever at some point come to saving faith in Christ by this point in history include myriads of by now dead believers, but God's house at any time doesn't even include all true believers alive at that moment, for there's the condition applied: 'if we hold fast ...' The Hebrews' letter was written as its name implies, to early Jewish Christians – and the very first Christians were, of course, mostly Jews. They had left behind the ceremonial Law of Moses to embrace Jesus as the Messiah and follow the teaching of his apostles. By following the apostles' teaching they found themselves in the New Testament churches of God. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles documents exactly how this came about. The existence of these churches spread outwards from Jerusalem, particularly as a result of the various missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. They were united in belief and practice as a model community. But just as Christians are persecuted in some parts of the world today, the early Jewish believers (the Hebrews) were also a persecuted community. And

some of them, by the time that the letter to the Hebrews came to be written, had come to feel life would be easier outside of this Messianic community. Life would be simpler again if they were just going along with the Law of Moses like the majority of folks around them, at least in Israel.

To people just like that who were wavering on the brink of leaving the community of churches of God, the writer of the Hebrews' letter makes his appeal by the Spirit of God: 'don't go back; don't fall away.' To quit their association with the practising Christian community would not mean the loss of their salvation, but – and this is the main point of the entire letter – they would miss out on everything that was special in serving God together in the biblical community of churches of God: the very things the Old Testament had been anticipating! It would be a falling away in terms of their service – and from the privileges and responsibilities which attended it. In short, they'd lose their place in God's house – not their salvation. They would lose their place in God's house which was that clearly defined community of believers, described in the pages of the New Testament as being where God lived by his Spirit in a way that answered exactly to earlier eras when the place where God lived on earth – his house – was known as Moses' Tabernacle or Solomon's Temple.

So, to recap, as the verse in Hebrews 3:6 says, God's house in the Church Age is not all believers – a fact that's clear from the obviously exclusive condition in Hebrews 3:6 – which verse contains an 'IF'. And since we cannot lose salvation, being in God's house must be about something lose-able which is beyond salvation (and where else can we draw the line other than at faithful obedience to the whole pattern of the Apostles Teaching?). In

fact, the grand story of the Bible is the story showing how those serving according to God's pattern of biblical teaching today are precisely those who form God's house in this age – and so it has been ever since the time of Acts chapter 2, in fact. Believers who come short of arriving at, or maintaining, a place in God's house on earth inevitably miss out on a joyful awareness of relating to our Lord specifically in his capacity as 'Son over God's house'. This is the view of the Lord which we hope to explore together in this book.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EXALTED PURIFIER OF SINS

The letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus in a unique way. In chapter three and verse six, he's described as being the 'Son over God's house.' The section surrounding this verse seems to expand our vision of what this means. For example, chapter 1 verse 3 tells us that Jesus: "... is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high ..."

I'd like to make some comments about our Lord Jesus Christ as the exalted purifier of sins. Let's try to put it in some kind of context by sharing an illustration. Imagine you have bought something from a retail outlet chain of shops and then you attempt to return the item due to some unsatisfactory feature which you've discovered in it. You're very aware that you're dealing with a multi-national organisation which has perhaps many millions of customers. You realize you are just a number to them, if that. But when you approach the help desk at your local store – to your amazement - it turns out that it's none other than the CEO of this retail giant who presents himself to resolve your problem! I suggest you'd be blown away if that happened: overwhelmed by that level of attention to detail. Yet that's nothing to what we find here as we consider who it is who has made purification for our sins! Our sins have received the personal attention of the Son of God!

Now it's easy to think that sins are sins are sins. But just wait a moment. The Old Testament, in Leviticus chapter 4, distinguished carefully between the sins of an individual and the sins of God's people. Look back at that chapter and you'll see there were quite different blood rituals in the two different cases. For an individual's sin the blood only went as far as the outside copper altar, for that was the place of individual approach to God – they could proceed no further; but if the people had sinned, the blood of their sin offering was taken by the priest representing the people and applied to some of the furniture inside the sacred tent which served then as God's house on earth as he travelled with his people to the promised land. And while the leftover part of the individual's sin offering which wasn't offered on the altar could be eaten by the priests; the same could not happen if the sacrifice for sins had been the consequence of the whole congregation of God's people sinning – in that case, the animal leftovers were to be taken outside the camp of Israel and burnt – they were not to be eaten.

Now the point of that Old Testament detour is to allow us to correctly apply the teaching of Hebrews. As early as chapter two, the sins mentioned are described as 'the sins of the people.' And there's a consistency maintained throughout, right until the last or 13th chapter. When Jesus' death is explained in terms of its results, the language of Hebrews picks up on the precise detail of the book of Leviticus – but always relates to the procedures applicable for the sins of the people of God, as distinct from the sins of an individual. And so, we read in chapter 9, for example, that Jesus' blood has cleansed the actual heavenly furniture that was copied in the earthly tabernacle. And, in the last chap-

ter, Jesus' death outside the city of Jerusalem is explained as corresponding to the sin offerings of the people of God long ago being burnt outside the camp of Israel.

What's all this telling us? It's clarifying that this Bible letter is not about the wonderful teaching of how an individual can get right with God. If you want to know more about that terrific topic, you should go to Paul's letter to the Romans. By contrast, it's shown that Hebrews is a letter for the people of God. It deals with the collective service for God which is performed by an obedient people on earth. If we miss that, we miss something rather fundamental in this letter – something, unfortunately, which has often been missed by many worthy commentators.

And in the time of Leviticus, God was speaking out from his house on earth while he made such a procedural difference in the way in which sin was dealt with long ago. So, in the Hebrews' context, the sins mentioned are the sins committed by God's people in service for God as they operate as his earthly house. The letter to the Hebrews, we say again, is not teaching us about our salvation, but about our service for God as Christians in this world. We are forgiven, yes; but we're not perfect. The people of God as viewed here are a failing people. But the most wonderful thing of all is, when we're conscious of failing, we can look above and see Jesus who made purification for our sins. He's the man in the glory, seated at God's right hand. Satan may accuse, but who can lay anything to the charge of God's elect?

A failing folk, a people enfeebled through sin, can worship God spiritually in the highest place above now – but only because that 'man in the glory' lives! He lives to bring a worshiping people

near to God the Father who's long been seeking them as his worshipers. Yes, we've been reconciled by Christ's death – and that is so amazing; but we're also saved by his life as we draw near to God in service and in worship (Romans 5:10). We appear before God in his sanctuary to worship him not through our own merits but absolutely through Christ's virtues.

Back in the land of Egypt, before Abraham's race was made God's covenant people, there was talk of redemption. But after they're saved, baptized and obeying God as his people, it's then we begin to read of the various purifying or cleansing rituals they had to continually engage in while on active duty in and around the courts of God's house. Sadly, they weren't always as diligent in these matters as they ought to have been. As recorded in the first book of Samuel, Eli was the other head of a priestly house who's recorded in the Bible as having sat down ... and that was a disaster for the people of God then. And why was it a disaster? God said to Eli: 'Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of My people Israel?' (1 Samuel 2:29).

It was a disaster because Eli sat down without having first made purification of sins – even the blatant sins of his own priestly family. Tragically, through Eli's laxity, an earlier version of God's house suffered, as God allowed the sacred ark of the covenant – that which symbolised the presence of God among his people – to be captured for a while by the enemy. And things were no better in Malachi's time, right at the end of the Old Testament record, for we're told then that God would've actually preferred the door of his house to be shut! Praise God, there's no such un-

faithfulness now in the governance of God's house! The one who has sat down at God's right hand, and in governance over God's house on earth, is one whose sin-atoning death has cleansed the heavenly things themselves among which we now enter as we serve in the holy place above.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROYAL SON OF DAVID'S DYNASTY

Do you have any idea which part of the Old Testament is quoted most often in the New? I'm afraid there are no prizes for guessing, which is probably just as well, as I might have had to give away too many! It's fairly well known that Psalm 110 is that part of the Old Testament quoted most often in the New Testament. And one of the places where it features importantly is in the Bible letter to the Hebrews. And it's Hebrews alone which explains why Psalm 110 is in the Bible! Because its inclusion in the book of psalms, not to mention in the canon of Scripture, must've been something of a puzzle to the Jews: after all, why would this psalm choose to introduce a future priest who belonged to the different priestly order of Melchizedek? After all, the priestly order of Aaron had long been established by Moses with God's own authority of course – and this was even something that was such an integral part of the Law. So how could this be changed? How could there be a different kind of priest in future? And how could a priest sit on any throne, far less God's throne?! Well, as we've said, it's in the letter to the Hebrews that this puzzle is solved, and we get the answer – and it's certainly worth waiting for!

The very first chapter of Hebrews ends with a verbatim quote from Psalm 110 (in v.13), but even way before that, in verse 3, we're probably meant to see another allusion to it. Verse three is the verse that talks about the making of purification of sins and then – even more tellingly – it talks about someone sitting down

at God's right hand side. The use of this expression leaves little room for doubt that Psalm 110 is very much in the author's mind even at this early point. Yes, an important part of the Bible background to Hebrews is Psalm 110, and that psalm introduces us to the fact that there's a man seated at God's right-hand side. It's a short psalm, so let's read it together now:

A Psalm of David.

"The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand

Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,

"Rule in the midst of Your enemies."

Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;

In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,

Your youth are to You as the dew.

The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind,

"You are a priest forever

According to the order of Melchizedek."

The Lord is at Your right hand;

He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.

He will judge among the nations, He will fill them
with corpses,

He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.

He will drink from the brook by the wayside;

Therefore He will lift up His head. (Psalm 110:1-7)

In other words, we learn that the LORD God spoke through David to his Lord Messiah, addressing the latter as one might speak to both a royal son of David's lineage and to a great priest of Melchizedek's order. As the Lord Jesus himself pointed out from this psalm to the Jews of his own generation, David acknowledges that God is speaking through him and addressing someone who is both his (that is David's) son and David's Lord. And the person being addressed is addressed as both king and priest. For, this short psalm is really made up of two oracles – that is, it's in two parts which each reveal something of the nature of the coming Messiah. These two parts are introduced respectively by the wording: 'the LORD says' and 'The LORD has sworn'.

The first addresses the Messiah as a royal son of David's lineage and the second addresses him equally as a great priest of Melchizedek's order. These two wonderful descriptions of the coming Messiah are expounded in the psalm - and then we later find them resounding again and again when they are quoted in Hebrews – just like a bell that's repeatedly being sounded – we find them as it were resounding in the words 'you are my son' and 'you are a priest.' It's only the first of these – the expression 'you are my son' – that I want to talk about here. But it's hard to

avoid trying to imagine the thrill of the Father as we read the letter to the Hebrews - it's as if he keeps exclaiming these things to his son! But it's time we read a few verses from near the beginning of Hebrews:

“When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten You”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me”?” (Hebrews 1:3-5). We've already said the big message of Hebrews is this: that 'Jesus is better'! For a start, he's better than the angels. We're even given a couple of reasons why here. There are reasons stated either side of verse 4 to support the fact of the Lord's supremacy over the angels. Did you notice them? Actually, both relate to the Lord as being the God-man, but we'll come to that.

The one that went before was the one about his purification of our sins – no angel has done, or could do, that. And the reason that came after was the one about the Lord belonging to the line of David – again something that couldn't be true of any angel. Perhaps, you didn't think of Hebrews one verse 5 as being about how Jesus was a son of king David? Isn't it rather talking about Jesus being God's son? Isn't that how he's shown to be better than the angels – because he's God's son?

Well wait a moment, in order to bridge the gap between these ancient texts (quoted in 1:5) from the book of Psalms and the first book of Samuel, and the point where we find ourselves in history, I want to explain the royal connotation which the term

'my son' has in Psalm 2:7. That's where the first quote in Hebrews 1:5 comes from. It comes from Psalm 2:7 where the speaker who's the newly installed king says: "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" I agree that, as we tend to read that, our thoughts immediately turn to Jesus. For a start, we know these words are applied by New Testament writers to Jesus, for example by the Apostle Paul in Acts chapter 13. But the place to start in all Bible exposition is to start with our understanding of what the original hearers would've or should've understood by it in the first place. So let's do that. Psalm 2 appears to have been a coronation psalm – or at least it was used to recall and reaffirm the enthronement of the king in Jerusalem at some point in history when surrounding nations were flexing their muscles and wanting to rebel from being under Judean sovereignty. Before Solomon's coronation, you'll remember, God had promised to David concerning his son:

"I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:14-16).

As this text made very clear, specifically in the case of Solomon, the king of the line of David was viewed as God's adopted son: viewed as the one charged with the same duty as God, namely

administering rule over God's people. But this would not only be true of Solomon, because there's talk of David's throne being established for ever. Other successive descendants of David, down to the Messiah himself, would be used to fulfil this. So, we see that in general, the great king in heavenly Zion and the king of David's line in Jerusalem were viewed in such scriptures as existing in a father-son relationship.

So, going back to Psalm 2, we shouldn't overload it with mysticism. The 'today' it mentions is the coronation day of a new king in David's dynasty. Someone had recently ascended to the throne in Jerusalem, and the surrounding vassal states were taking the opportunity to signal that they were unhappy with imperialist Judean rule in his hands. Of course, the greatest application of this text is, indeed, in its application to the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. The first church of God in Jerusalem, could see that its message was very meaningful in understanding what had taken place at the cross (Acts 4).

Our Lord was born as a royal son of David's line. And, in that, as in the fact that he went to the cross and established the basis for all purification of sins, we have two stated reasons why he is better than any angel! And each of these two reasons involve the wonder of his becoming flesh, so that it could truly be said of him that he is 'the son over God's [earthly] house' – the house, which as we shall see, is made up of his human companions!

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FELLOW OVER GOD'S FELLOWSHIP

The letter to the Hebrews describes those who are 'brothers' of Christ. It also describes those who are 'fellows' of Christ. Let's consider for a moment the verses from which these facts are drawn. Hebrews 2:11 says: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren ..." All who relate to God as their heavenly Father, have the gracious privilege of being owned by Christ, their personal saviour, as being his brothers. This is true of all born-again believers, that is, all who belong to the Church which is biblically called the body of Christ at the end of Ephesians chapter 1. But then again, God the Father when addressing his Son in Hebrews 1:9 says, "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions."

Now the question we'll be asking in this chapter is 'who are those companions – or fellows – of Christ?' For sure, the Bible here tells us that the Father has anointed Christ over his fellows, but who are these fellows who are being referred to? And what's the difference anyway between being called a brother of Christ and being called a fellow of Christ? Is there really any difference? Renowned Bible scholar, W.E. Vine, says about the word 'fellows' that ... 'It marks an even closer relationship than brethren.' But who are in that relationship with Christ? We're going to need to try, purely from the context of the Hebrews' letter, to

see if we can identify precisely who these fellows are. There's no shortage of candidates, of course. We've been saying all along that the big message of the letter to the Hebrews is that 'Jesus is better.' And we've seen already that this applies to prophets, priests, kings, and angels.

So, is this a case of Jesus being said to be honoured above all other prophets, priests and kings? Are they his fellows in the sense that he too was a prophet and is both a priest and king? The opening chapter of this letter also sets out to demonstrate the great gulf between Jesus and the angels – but in what sense can they be his fellows? None surely.

Some might think there's yet another possibility because the Old Testament (Zechariah 13:7) talks about Jesus as a fellow together with the other two members of the Godhead – the Father and the Spirit. But, straightaway we have to dismiss that from contention - there's no way biblically in which Jesus could be exalted over the other persons of the Godhead.

As we read the context in Hebrews surrounding where we have the words which tell us that Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows or companions, we find the very same word being used again and again. It's not always translated into English as 'fellows' or 'companions' but sometimes as 'sharers' or 'partakers'. The main point is that all these variants in English come from the same underlying word in the original language. And they're all used in the same section of Hebrews, that's the important point. We're not at liberty to identify the different meanings of words when they occur in different contexts all over the Bible, but if the same word is used often in the same sec-

tion, it most likely does mean the same thing in each place. So, let's trace them here. At the beginning of Hebrews chapter 3, we read:

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession ... [and] ... encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:1,13-14).

So, there we have it: the fellows of Christ are the partakers of Christ who are sharers of a heavenly calling (same word in all three cases). And obviously, these are the very people to whom the author is writing this letter in the first place. In other words, these words apply to Jewish Christians in the first century Churches of God (v.6 is totally parallel with v.14). We've often made the point that all the local churches we read of in the New Testament were closely linked together, such that all those in them all formed one single New Testament community, one that's variously described as a nation or kingdom or priesthood or house for God. In that connection, I want to draw your attention to a verse in First Corinthians chapter one, verse 9, which says:

“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divi-

sions among you ... For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you” (1 Corinthians 1:9-11).

That was from my usual Bible, the New American Standard Version; but allow me to repeat the reading from the English Standard Version:

“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you ... For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.”

The difference I want you to notice is in verse 9. Was the Apostle Paul talking about the believers at Corinth enjoying fellowship with the Lord Jesus in their daily lives, or did he intend to describe them as representing the overall fellowship of New Testament believers owned by the Lord Jesus, and to which they belonged by virtue of them being in the local Church of God at Corinth? Obviously, as we've demonstrated by using two different translations, either meaning is grammatically possible. But which makes most sense in the flow of the Apostle's original argument? New Testament Greek scholar, Gordon Fee, supports the 'fellowship of believers' idea by reasonably citing verse 10 as confirmation - in that the passage goes on to refer very concretely to a fellowship of believers such as existed at Corinth - one which should've been without divisions, but sadly wasn't. The

next verse is certainly talking about the state of the local fellowship of believers.

I believe this is correct, as it fits perfectly with the overall New Testament context which we've already noted – you remember how we spoke of all the Church of God believers in all the different locations having a sense of overall identity. They all belonged to the one community. It's that community or fellowship as something which rightly belonged to the Lord Jesus that's being referred to here. Each believer then had been called into this distinct community through the call of the Lord in the Gospel. Together, in this community, they were sharers of such a heavenly calling. So, believers in any first century local Church of God belonged to the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus. We can confirm this from day one of the history of the Churches of God, as we refer back to Acts chapter 2 and verse 42 where we read that the first disciples: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... And all who believed were together ..." (Acts 2:42,44).

As much as they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, they also devoted themselves to the fellowship where they enjoyed such togetherness. This was no casual fellowship, it literally was 'the fellowship', something very definite and tangible is being referred to here. In fact, there's a practical demonstration of this by analogy that we can take from the Gospel by Luke: "When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them" (Luke 5:6-7). This, you may remember, was the time when Jesus had commanded Peter to go fishing despite Peter, the experienced fisherman,

thinking it would be a waste of time. But go he did – and with the result we’ve just read about. So many fish were caught that they needed to call on their partners – or fellows (same word as in the Hebrews’ letter) - to help them. So this word we’ve been exploring certainly was used of a business partnership. Biblical church fellowship is to be a similar commitment: to each other, but most importantly to the Lord whose fellowship it is.

Remember, this exploration has been about establishing that, in Hebrews, the Lord Jesus is being described as being ‘over his fellows.’ I hope we’ve shown conclusively that the readers of that letter were the fellows being referred to, that is those who were in the first century churches of God. It’s not referring to prophets or angels or any others. Jesus being anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows is a statement regarding our Lord’s position over the New Testament community – over the entire fellowship of Churches of God. In other words, over the Fellowship into which the faithful God had called these believers who’d faithfully followed the Apostles’ teaching. They’d been called into something existing in this world, but which belonged to our Lord.

Now what was it W.E. Vine said about the privilege of being fellows in this fellowship? He said: ‘It marks an even closer relationship than brethren.’ I believe he was absolutely correct: for the fellowship in question is the fellowship of God’s earthly house – over which Jesus Christ is here said to be Son.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GREATEST EVER EXAMPLE OF FAITHFULNESS

Christian author, A.W. Tozer, once wrote, ‘the meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is in the sight of God of more importance than angels. In himself, nothing; in God, everything. That is his motto.’ (Today in the Word, September, 1989, p.19.)

We want to begin this chapter by referring to a man like that. He's someone who gets an honourable mention in the Bible letter to the Hebrews. I'm referring to the man, Moses. Bible scholar, Jim Packer, says of Moses: ‘His meekness was shown in his acceptance of what God ordained, including endless battles with those recalcitrant and disappointing people whom he was trying to lead from Egypt to Canaan, including, even, the enormous disappointment of himself not getting into the Promised land.

Moses was a man with a fierce temper – it was this which had betrayed him during the time in the wilderness - but when God said, in effect, “Now look, Moses, in order to teach the whole world how much loss sin can bring, I'm not going to let you enter the land; the people will go in, but you won't,” he did not curse God in furious protest; quietly, if sadly, he accepted God's decision. That's meekness. Meekness, for a child of God, means

accepting uncomplainingly what comes, knowing that it comes from the hand of God who orders all things. What he sends, we accept in faith even if it hurts, knowing that it's for our and others' good.' (James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.)

Packer was commenting there on a very remarkable Bible statement concerning Moses, the man of God. It's found in the Bible book of Numbers, chapter 12 and verse 3, and tells us that Moses was the meekest man of his generation on earth. Let's read the circumstances which led up to God declaring that fact in his Word:

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” And the three of them came out. And the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. And he said, “Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the

form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:1-8 ESV).

Meek, he certainly was, but you'll have also noticed that God praised his faithfulness, saying that Moses was faithful in all his house - by the way, God's house then was the Tabernacle. The story of the Tabernacle is told in the book of Exodus from chapter 25 to 40. That many chapters shows its importance to God. After all, it was God's house then, the place where his presence was specially known on earth. Moses had been entrusted with God's blueprint for its design up there on Mount Sinai where he'd received the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. Moses was the kind of person that when you gave him a job to do, he got it done - the way you wanted. That was important - so important - to God. This house had to be just right: it was God's own house on earth.

It was designed to be the centre for the Israelite people's worship. This was the place to which they brought their sacrifices, to the great copper altar standing just outside the tent. Here the priests operated according to the instructions of the Law as to how they should prepare and offer all the animals on the altar. Moses ensured that every detail was correct in the operation of God's house. You can read about one day - it's recorded in Leviticus chapter 10 - when Moses actually stepped up and challenged his brother Aaron, the high priest, about something he was doing. Moses saw that the exact procedure of the sin offering had not been carried out by his brother and so he challenged him. It turned out that Aaron could defend his actions that day, but God appreciated that quality of careful faithfulness on Moses'

part, and said so with these words of his being recorded in Numbers 12 verse 7: ‘my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.’ Now, so much for the background, we come now to the letter we’re studying, the letter to the Hebrews, and there we find a gracious comparison with Moses:

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house ... Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ [is] 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” (Hebrews 3:1-6).

Well, we’ve mentioned already that Moses’ faithfulness as a servant in God’s house was shown from Mount Sinai onwards in relation to the portable structure known biblically as the tabernacle – about which this letter to the Hebrews will have much more to say. Most significantly, it tells us in chapter 9 verse 9 that the tabernacle then was symbolic for the time we live in now. In other words, that physical structure in the past has been replaced with a spiritual house for God on earth today. This is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, for example in 1 Peter 2:5, and we can surely see that it’s comprised of believers, described as living stones, and it’s the intended sphere of their service for God in the offering up of sacrifices of praise and worship. It’s equally clear from what we’ve just read in Hebrews that it’s not all living

believers because there's a stated condition of holding fast. Our salvation is unconditional; but our service is conditional. God's house is therefore a truth beyond salvation.

The same emphasis in relation to serving in association with God's house was given in the days of Moses. God stressed then the requirement of obedience. He demanded faithfulness. And Moses showed the people a good example of the faithfulness God expects with regard to his house. You'll remember how Moses showed his faithfulness by climbing up Mount Sinai at least seven times. Don't forget he was a man of at least eighty years of age at this point! But if you read the chapters of the book of Exodus from chapter 19 onwards, you can count for yourself the numerous occasions when God told Moses to 'come up' and 'go down' the mountain. The main objective in all of that was for him to get the Word of God straight for the people of God to obey it.

A far greater ascending and descending was involved for the one who is now the faithful son over God's house: our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember the contrast: Moses was a servant in God's physical house long ago; but Jesus is the son over God's spiritual house today. Our Lord descended from heaven as the greatest of all prophets to bring us God's Word. It's wonderful to consider his own determination to communicate well. In his prayer recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 17, Jesus says to his Father while speaking about his Apostles: 'I gave them Your Word.'

And by the Spirit of God, they received from him, their Master, that sacred trust of his Word, and they delivered it to succeeding generations of believers, even 'all those who have believed on Je-

sus through their word.' When Paul the Apostle was relaying all he'd received to the younger man, Timothy, he spoke in terms of entrusting to him a beautiful deposit for safe-keeping (2 Timothy 1).

Long ago, the people of Israel, as they camped around the special tent which was the tabernacle, saw the hugely inspiring example of Moses' personal faithfulness. In our case, we open our Bibles to view there the greatest ever example of faithfulness: that of our Lord – he who is faithful in all God's house. Some Bible translations put it in the past tense, when they say: 'Christ was faithful in all God's house.' The words 'was faithful' are not in the original. They've been supplied by the translators to give the sense. Faithfulness is certainly implied. But the tense must surely be present (see Romans 5:10). Our Lord is currently a great priest over, and son over, God's spiritual house on earth, even as he serves in the sanctuary associated with that same house which is in heaven.

Let's not fail to follow our Lord's example of faithfulness in relation to God's house. How can we be faithful in this way? We can be faithful to the Lord by being faithful to his Word – that which the Apostles wrote down in their New Testament writings.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SPLENDOUR OF THE ARCHITECT

In London's St. Paul's Cathedral, its architect Sir Christopher Wren lies buried. The Latin inscription where he lies can be translated: if you seek his monument look all around you! But that's as nothing compared to the achievement of Christ. Brothers and sisters in churches of God can look around on each other and see how from hell-deserving rubble, from stones rescued from the burning, our Lord has fashioned a habitation for God in the Spirit! This is what we find written in Hebrews chapter 3:

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ is 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” (Hebrews 3:1-6).

From that we see that our Lord is counted worthy of a greater glory than Moses. Not just comparatively more glory, but our Lord is worthy of a greater glory; an altogether different kind of glory. Moses built the tabernacle as a servant simply carrying out instructions. Indeed, we know that every house is built by someone, but the ultimate builder of all things is God. The word that's used there for builder is an expansive one: meaning to prepare thoroughly, to make everything ready, and to equip with all that's necessary.

The thrust of verses 3 and 4 taken together is to re-assert the deity of the Lord Jesus. The argument runs something like this:

Moses built the tabernacle;

And indeed every house is built by someone;

But the ultimate builder of all things is God;

And Christ, God's agent in creation, has in chapter one, been clearly shown to be God;

Therefore Christ has more honour and glory than Moses (compare 1:3).

The story is told that, when Sir Christopher Wren was supervising the construction of his cathedral in London, a journalist thought it would be interesting to interview some of the workers. He chose three of them and asked each of them this question, "What are you doing?" The first replied, "I'm cutting stone for 10 shillings a day." The next answered, "I'm putting in 10 hours a day on this job." But the third said, "I'm helping Sir

Christopher Wren construct one of London's greatest cathedrals.” (Source Unknown.)

It was a glory for that worker to be associated with Sir Christopher Wren's building, but it was an altogether different glory that belonged to the great architect himself. His name is honoured to this day, but the insightful worker is unknown by name. So Christ has a greater glory than Moses. He who is the radiance of God's glory built this magnificent universe. Literally, in Hebrews 1:2 when it says God made the world through his Son, it's the word 'ages' that's used. Through Christ, God made the ages, but that surely means all that they contain, as in 'in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' And the one through whom God is said to act in making the world is later, in verse 8, most unambiguously addressed as 'God' – personally distinct from the Father but possessed of full deity. Clearly, the Bible states that God the Son made the world, and that he is the ultimate builder of God's house. So Christ has a greater glory than Moses.

The glory of God rested above the house in the days of Moses and Solomon – now the one who's personally the radiance of divine glory (Hebrews 1:3) is himself over God's house. That's a glorious point at which to come to the conclusion of this series of studies which have been based on the opening section of the letter to the Hebrews. To sum up what we've seen: we've focused on the description that's found there, a description of Jesus as 'son over God's house.' Building up to this, we've identified five other things that are said of Jesus with reference to God's house on earth and his part in its operational ministry. Let me remind you of what they were: Jesus as the purifier of sins; as the royal

son of David's lineage; as the distinct fellow of the Fellowship; as the greatest example of faithfulness; and as the ultimate builder of all things. Taken together we're suggesting they illuminate this overarching title which he bears as 'son over God's house.'

In conclusion, we want to ask, "What should it matter to us that Jesus is son over God's house?" To those who were – and are – dubious about the identity of churches of God – in the 1st or the 21st century – the Holy Spirit plainly wanted to lift up the person and work of the Lord Jesus in the relation he bears to God's house by showing how committed he is to it. The author to the Hebrews warns time and again against treating lightly the responsibility and privilege of being found in a church of God within God's house. The five specific warnings around which the letter is structured are the dangers of:

- Neglecting the things spoken by the Lord & his Apostles (chapter 2);
- Failing to hold the confidence and hope which are integral to us being God's house (chapter 3);
- Hardening our hearts against a spiritually settled lifestyle (chapters 3,4);
- Falling away from the things which accompany salvation (chapter 6);
- Sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth (chapter 10).

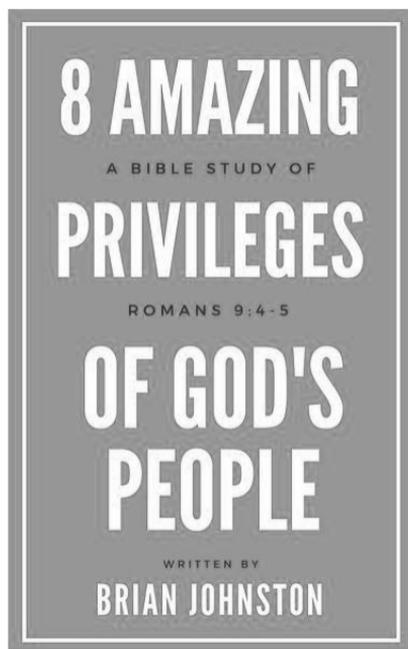
All five of these warnings seem to be making essentially the same point. And, indeed, the point needed repetition. For it seems that some in the first century were preparing to withdraw from the New Testament community – as it was expressed throughout the inter-linked churches of God. The line of demarcation around these churches then, coupled with their distinctive stand for uncompromising truth, could make them an uncomfortable place to be. The appeal of an easier life by merging back into mainstream Judaism again at times must have been felt strongly – especially when pressure came from family members from whom their stand had ostracised them. Perhaps, on the brink of departure, some wavering disciples who had previously been so committed in their devotion to the Apostles' teaching, began to rationalize that their defections were not such a big deal after all.

That was wrong thinking then; and it's wrong thinking today. For two vital questions remain to be answered by each generation of Christians: 'Is there a unique, God-given, biblical pattern for God's house in every age?' And, 'Are there any plain biblical instructions of the Lord which we feel can be safely ignored?' If our answers to these questions are "yes" to the first and "no" to the second, then we're going to inevitably find ourselves in an exclusive position, because it's exclusive of everything that's not according to the Lord's own pattern – by definition. We simply must buy into this – just as the very first readers of the Hebrews' letter were being asked to. It's not always comfortable – but must we not quit ourselves like men?

To do or think otherwise is wrong, for it robs of its potency the astounding revelation of this greatest Bible teaching letter. It's a revelation of Jesus as son over God's house. He's the one to whom

we can relate today in his ongoing operational ministry in heaven. We relate to him from the vantage point of being in God's house on earth: the house over which he serves faithfully. And so, I wonder if you've really got to grips with this message of the Hebrews' letter? You'll know you have when it evokes in you something similar to Jacob's great awakening as recorded in Genesis 28:17, when he declared how awesome it was to be in God's house. Christ sits at God's right-hand post-Calvary to give rest and stability – to give victory and purity – to our lives of service in God's house today.

Did you love *Jesus: Son Over God's House*? 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.

Also by Brian Johnston

Healthy Churches - God's Bible Blueprint For Growth

Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World

First Corinthians: Nothing But Christ Crucified

Bible Answers to Listeners' Questions

Living in God's House: His Design in Action

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The Glory of God
The Way: Being a New Testament Disciple
Power Outage - Christianity Unplugged
Windows to Faith: Insights for the Inquisitive



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