

# HEBREWS

AN OPEN DOOR



TO  
GOD

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men  
by H. Michael Brewer



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## An Open Door To God

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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# Hebrews

## CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study .....	3
Introduction to Hebrews.....	5
<i>session one</i> <i>Introduction</i> .....	8
<i>*Jesus Is More Than Moses</i>	
<i>Meeting God on the Mountain</i>	
<i>session two</i> <i>The Door of Christ Our High Priest</i> .....	12
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Who The Heck Is Melchizedek?</i>	
<i>*A High Priest Forever</i>	
<i>session three</i> <i>The Door of Christ Our Sacrifice</i> .....	16
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>*Jesus Is the Real Thing</i>	
<i>The Perfect Sacrifice</i>	
<i>session four</i> <i>The Door to Forgiveness</i> .....	20
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>The New Covenant</i>	
<i>*Through the Curtain</i>	
<i>session five</i> <i>Doors to Nowhere</i> .....	23
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>*Postponed Faith</i>	
<i>Angels, Angels Everywhere</i>	
<i>session six</i> <i>The Path of Maturity</i> .....	26
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Building on the Foundation</i>	
<i>*Beyond Repentance?</i>	
<i>session seven</i> <i>The Path of Faithfulness</i> .....	29
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>*A Parade of the Faithful</i>	
<i>All the Way to the Finish Line</i>	
<i>the writer</i> <i>Biography</i> .....	32
<i>order information</i> .....	32

# introduction

## Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study  
*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .  
The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through  
Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

### The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

**1. We will treat no question as stupid.** Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

**2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study.** The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

**3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.”** Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

**4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak.** Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

**5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.”** Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

**6. We will agree to disagree in love.** Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

**7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study.** Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

## Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give

everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, “Remember, we are not alone!” The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

# Hebrews

## INTRODUCTION

The Letter to the Hebrews may be the most mysterious book in the New Testament. Both the origins and the content of this book raise difficult questions for readers. Even the format of the book is problematic. Indeed, one scholar has said that New Testament interpreters agree on only one thing concerning Hebrews: Nobody really knows anything about it!<sup>1</sup>

For instance, the question of the author of Hebrews has produced a whole gallery of suspects. The letter itself does not name an author, although we can deduce a few things about the writer from the text. Hebrews exhibits a lofty mastery of the Greek language as well as noteworthy skill in rhetoric and logic. The writer possessed an impressive grasp of the Greek text of the Old Testament, as well as an undeniable familiarity with Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism. Beyond these generalizations we cannot say much with certainty.

The Letter to the Hebrews has been attributed to several writers:

1. It has been routinely attributed to Paul, although few scholars today would defend this position. The style of Hebrews is markedly different from Paul's writings.
2. The early church father Tertullian argued for the authorship of Barnabas, a Christian Levite from Cyprus who would have been comfortable straddling the twin worlds of Jewish priestly theology and Greek philosophy.
3. Martin Luther suggested that Apollos might be the writer of Hebrews. Apollos was known for his eloquence, his skill in argument, and his encyclopedic knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. As a native of Alexandria, Apollos would have been well versed in Greek thought.
4. A more contemporary suggestion holds out the possibility that Hebrews may have been written by a woman. Priscilla has been mentioned as one candidate. Could it be that the writer's name has disappeared from the text and the tradition due to a reluctance to grant teaching authority to a woman in the early church?

All of these possibilities are intriguing, but they remain no more than fanciful theories. In fact, no

one may name the author of Hebrews with any measure of certainty.

Just as authorship remains a mystery, we cannot point clearly to the audience for whom the letter was written. Centuries of tradition assume that the first readers were Jewish Christians who were being tempted to abandon Christianity, returning to their Jewish faith. This is certainly a plausible theory since the writer expends so much effort proving the superiority of Christ over Moses and the Jewish priesthood.

However, more recent scholarship has pointed out that the letter never explicitly addresses itself to Jewish Christians. It does not address Jewish legalism or circumcision, issues we would expect to encounter in a discussion with wavering Jewish Christians. Indeed, nothing is in the letter that could not have been written to Gentile Christians. Even the extensive Old Testament quotations do not prove a Jewish Christian audience; after all, the Hebrew Scriptures were the Christian Bible in the first century.

Again, we must be content with broad deductions about the intended audience of Hebrews. The recipients of the letter were a long-established congregation (Heb. 5:12) who had undergone some persecution in the past (Heb. 10:32–34). Judging from the personal note, “Those from Italy send you greetings” (Heb. 13:24), the destination of the letter was probably to a congregation in Italy. Beyond these bare inferences, we can only speculate.

Even the form of Hebrews sparks controversy. For convenience we will refer to Hebrews as a letter, but many characteristics of a typical letter are missing from Hebrews. There is no salutation or greeting of any kind at the beginning of Hebrews. A glance at other New Testament letters will show how unusual this is.

The whole work is so tight in organization and elaborate in reasoning that Hebrews reads more like a carefully polished essay. Some have suggested that Hebrews is actually a sermon in written form. And yet the writer exhibits a very personal knowledge of his readers, and the book ends with personal regards. A letter, a sermon, or both?

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 475. Used by permission.

## What's the Problem?

For all the uncertainties that surround Hebrews, the purpose of the letter seems fairly clear. Whatever the precise identity of the first readers, they are obviously in danger of turning away from their faith. A renewed persecution is threatening the congregation from without, and they are simultaneously in danger from a growing apathy within. Their earlier zeal is waning, and they are on the verge of backsliding from their commitment to Jesus Christ. The writer is anxious that his readers should stir up their prior enthusiasm and cling fiercely to their beliefs.

These drifting Christians must “hold fast to the confession of . . . hope without wavering” (Heb. 10:23). They must “go on toward perfection” (Heb. 6:1). They must “run with perseverance the race that is set before [them]” (Heb. 12:1).

In order to encourage the faithfulness of these vacillating Christians, the author builds a lengthy and elaborate argument to prove the superiority of Christ over every means of grace that is available

in Judaism. Systematically, this letter explores the foundations of atonement as practiced in Old Testament times and shows that Jesus Christ fulfills or supersedes the old ways.

Jesus Christ surpasses every angel and prophet through whom God may have spoken, even Moses himself, as surely as a beloved son surpasses a servant. Jesus is the great high priest who accomplishes what no other Jewish priest could undertake. Even though Jesus is not descended from the priestly line of Aaron, Jesus is the perfect priest who offers the perfect sacrifice to God, once and for all. In order to do this, Jesus enters into the true tabernacle in the heavens, not a mere earthly copy.

In every instance the new covenant of Christ is a better way to approach God than through the old covenant of Moses. Even the great heroes of the Jewish faith were actually pressing on toward the vision of the coming covenant of grace through God's Son. In the face of so much evidence, how can the readers do anything but hold fast to their faith and press forward in loving obedience?

## HEBREWS

Christ: The Better Priest of the Better Covenant

*“Since we have a great priest . . . Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering” (10:21–23).*

1:1 <b>Christ Is Better Than Angels</b> The Old Testament exalts not angels but the Son, 1:1–14 Therefore, be faithful, 2:1–4 for in Christ, God has identified not with angels but with us, 2:5–18	3:1 <b>Christ Is Better Than Moses</b> Moses was God's servant; Jesus was God's Son, 3:1–6 Under Moses, the Hebrews never got what was promised, 3:7–4:13	4:14 <b>Christ Is Better Than the Old Priesthood</b> Being truly human, he can better represent us to God, 4:14–5:11 So do not be sluggish, but go forward on God's promises, 5:12–6:20 Christ is a special kind of high priest, like Melchizedek, 7:1–28	8:1 <b>Christ's New Covenant Is Better Than the Old</b> The old covenant rested only on symbols, 8:1–9:10 But Christ has entered the real sanctuary, heaven, 9:11–10:18 Therefore, do not waver, 10:19–39	11:1 <b>Faith's Heroes of the Old Testament Sought to Go Forward to This Better Covenant We Have in Christ</b> Abel, 11:1–7 The patriarchs, 11:8–22 Moses, 11:23–31 Many more, 11:32–40	12:1–13:25 <b>Therefore, Let Us Go Forward with Christ in Faith, Love, and Obedience</b> Go forward in faith, in spite of opposition, 12:1–28 Go forward in love and obedience, 13:1–25
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**Author:** Unknown

**Recipients:** Christians—“holy partners in a heavenly calling” (former Jews? in Rome?)

**Date:** Unknown (A.D. 90? A.D. 60?)

**Occasion:** Some are tempted to “turn away” (3:12) to apostasy (6:6).

**Purpose:** Having shown the superiority of Christ to everything in the Old Testament (Covenant), to encourage apathetic Christians to move forward in the New Covenant.

\*William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 476. Used by permission.



## Direct Access To God!

All religion might be understood as a quest to reach God. Different religions recognize different barriers that separate us from the divine realm, that is, illusion or ignorance on the part of human beings or even enmity on the side of the gods. In the biblical tradition, sin is the great obstacle to our true communion with God. Our loving God is always working to remove that obstacle, and the Letter to the Hebrews is a celebration of God's victory over the dividing wall of human sin.

More deliberately and more eloquently than any other New Testament writing, Hebrews declares that Jesus Christ has removed the blockades and opened a way into the realm of heaven. In the risen Christ, we have direct access to God!

No longer do we need to offer an endless round of animal sacrifices or pin our hopes on human or angelic go-betweens. Jesus has flung aside the curtain that used to hide God from our eyes, and our Savior stands ready to usher us into the very presence of the Most High!

As we shall shortly see, the ringing theme of Hebrews is captured in these powerful words:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith. . . .

(Heb. 10:19–22)

## Resources

If you wish to do further research on Hebrews, a multitude of excellent commentaries and studies are available. Here are a few that I have found helpful:

Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990.

George Wesley Buchanan, *To The Hebrews*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972.

Louis H. Evans, *The Communicator's Commentary: Hebrews*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985.

Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981.

In the case of Hebrews, where so many Old Testament references abound, Bible dictionaries can also be quite helpful to the reader. The following is a sound, one-volume dictionary:

Paul J. Achtemeier, editor, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

# session

Heb. 1:1-4; 3:1-6;  
12:18-29

## Direct Access TO GOD

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

The story is told of a rabbi who gathered a group of disciples so that he could share with them his profound understanding of the holy writings. As the first class began the rabbi said, "Thus says the Lord . . ." Suddenly one student leaped to his feet and began to shout, "God spoke! God spoke!" The excited student repeated those two words over and over until the other students finally removed him from the room and locked him out.

The second day, the rabbi once again commenced his teaching with the same formula, "Thus says the Lord . . ." The same student once more broke into a repetitious chorus of, "God spoke! God spoke!" After a few minutes of this yelling, the other students again removed the noisy disciple from the room.

This went on every day, week after week, until the rabbi had finished his series of lessons. At the conclusion of the final class, the students gathered around the teacher to express their appreciation. One student said, "What a shame that our excitable brother never had the opportunity to learn from you about the Scriptures."

The rabbi smiled gently and said, "On the contrary, that young man learned the most important lesson of all. He learned that God has spoken to us!"

God spoke! God spoke! That is something to shout about. In the past, God spoke to us in many different ways, but in these latter days God has spoken to us through Jesus Christ—God's own Son!

In the old days, God's voice was inevitably distorted by the vessels through whom God chose to speak. Jonah spoke God's message reluctantly and grudgingly (Jonah 4). Nathan once misunderstood God and had to reverse his message to King David (2 Sam. 7:1-13). Even Moses failed to carry out God's instructions faithfully (Num. 20:1-13). This is not a condemnation of the prophets, merely a recognition that human servants cannot perfectly deliver God's message to the world.

Jesus Christ is a spokesman of a different order. Unlike any other human being, Jesus is the very

Son of God. Jesus is the reflection or the shining of God's glory, and in Old Testament thinking the shining glory is the sure sign of God's true presence. Furthermore, Jesus is "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3). Jesus can speak for God with perfect clarity because Jesus is the living, incarnate presence of God in the world. The difference between the earlier prophets and Jesus is the difference between smoke signals and a face-to-face conversation!

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite several readings of Heb. 1:1-4 from as many different translations as are available in the group.

*God really has spoken to us in many different ways through the ages. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the following means of revelation? Is each of these reliable in your opinion?*

*The natural world*

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*Worship and ritual*

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*Sermons*

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*Laws and rules*

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*The prophets*

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*Angels and spirits*

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*Conscience*

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*Church policy statements*

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*Creeds and confessions*

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*Is it arrogant to believe that God has spoken more clearly through Jesus Christ than through other religions? Explain your thinking.*

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*What does it mean to you that Jesus “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3)?*

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So the writer to the Hebrews turns to Moses in order to press the point of Jesus’ superiority over every aspect of the old covenant. Even Moses must take second place to Jesus Christ. For although Moses was one of God’s greatest servants, in the end he was only a servant. On the other hand, Jesus was God’s Son.

In any household, surely the son and heir holds a place superior to even the chief servant. Indeed, it might be argued that since the son is a member of the family, the son actually had a share in the building of the house. The one who builds the house is inarguably greater than one who merely serves in the house.

By the same token, God had created the universe through Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2), and the Son is the rightful heir of all things belonging to God. For all that Moses was a faithful and obedient servant in God’s world, Christ was the agent through whom Moses and the world were made!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask one member of the group to read aloud Heb. 3:1–6 while others follow along in their Bibles. If there are differences in translation, allow time for comparisons.

In Heb. 3:1 Jesus is described as “apostle and high priest.” We will return later to the idea of Jesus as high priest, but what does it mean to call Jesus an apostle? Does the passage make more sense if we substitute the word “ambassador”?

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*What is the relationship between an ambassador and the one who sends the ambassador? Who speaks with more authority: a servant or an ambassador?*

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*In Luke 9:28–36, Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus and converse with him about his coming departure. In that passage, the word for departure is the Greek word that means “exodus.” What does this story say about the relationship between Jesus and Moses?*

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**\* JESUS IS MORE THAN MOSES**

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

The founder of the nation! The leader of the Exodus! The lawgiver! The prophet who spoke to God face to face! Moses was all of this and more. Moses was held in highest esteem by the Jewish people and rightly so. He was a hero, a role model, and a holy man.

If the church is “God’s house,” what is the rightful role of Jesus in the church?

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What does this passage say we must do if we are to become God’s house?

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Would you rather find yourself at Mount Sinai or Mount Zion? Explain.

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Do you think God is depicted differently in the Old and New Testaments? If so, why do you think this happens? Has God changed?

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## Meeting God on the Mountain

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

God is often depicted as a fearsome figure in the Old Testament, so implacably holy as to be unapproachable by mortals. Just such a picture emerges from the story of God’s appearance on Mount Sinai after Moses has led Israel out of Egypt. This was the way God spoke to us in the earlier days. But in these latter days God has spoken to us through a child born in a stable, a humble carpenter, a wandering teacher without credentials or official authority.

In Jesus Christ, God has spoken to us in a way that does not terrify us or drive us away in awe. And yet, this is still the God of holiness and fire! If ignoring the voice of God in the Old Testament times brought disaster on the people, we may be certain that we will also pay a price for ignoring the voice of Jesus Christ in our own day.

In Heb. 1:6, Jesus is referred to as the “firstborn.” Who is the “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” in Heb. 12:23?

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You will find the story of the blood of Abel in Gen. 4:1–16. What is the “word” spoken by Abel’s blood? What is the “word” spoken by the blood of Jesus?

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The latter half of Heb. 12:25–29 reminds us that the coming of Christ has not canceled out the justice and judgment of God. Is it difficult or easy for you to picture Jesus Christ as a figure of judgment? Explain your feelings.

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The writer says that God will shake and remove some things “so that what cannot be shaken may remain” (Heb. 12:27). What does this mean to you in regard to the judgment of God?

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“For indeed our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29) concludes the writer to the Hebrews. Can you think of ways in which fire is a positive and comforting symbol? (Perhaps you will wish to consider Luke 3:15–16 and Acts 2:1–3.)

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### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read Heb. 12:18–29 silently first and then have them listen while one person reads the passage aloud.

Hebrews 12:18–24 compares and contrasts the appearance of God on Mount Sinai with God’s presence in the heavenly city on Mount Zion. Make a list of the key descriptive words in both scenes.

#### Mount Sinai

#### Mount Zion

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Sometimes “a consuming fire” is a symbol of refining precious metals by burning away the dross and impurities, as in Mal. 3:1–4. When you reflect on God’s judgment, what do you think needs to be burned away

*in the world?*

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*in the church?*

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*in yourself?*

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*Christians belong to “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28). How would you express that thought in your own words?*

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## Concluding the Session

Christian Scriptures have been too often twisted to support anti-Jewish prejudice, so we must take special care with the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer insists that God has spoken with unparalleled clarity through Jesus, but he does not deny that God also spoke through Moses and the prophets. The Old Testament is the foundation of the New, and Israel is the nation from which the Messiah is born into the world.

We Christians are unapologetic in our belief that God has offered us a better way to salvation through Jesus Christ, but it behooves us to nurture respect and affection for Judaism, the “older brother” of Christianity.

Perhaps the group should take a few minutes to address issues of anti-Semitism. What is a healthy relationship between Jews and Christians? How can we celebrate our own Christian faith without denigrating the Jewish faith? How can we share the joy of our relationship with Jesus Christ in a loving manner with Jewish friends?

In our closing today, we will affirm the gifts we have received through the Old Covenant and celebrate the grace of Jesus Christ mediated through the New Covenant with the following responsive prayer:

*One:* God of the ages, we are thankful for every voice that has spoken your word in the world.

*All:* We give thanks for Hebrew prophets and priests.

*All:* We give thanks for the Law given through Moses.

*One:* We give thanks for the worship of Israel in Temple and synagogue from which we have learned so much.

*One:* We give thanks for Hebrew stories, teachings, and writings that make up so much of our Bible.

*All:* We give thanks for centuries of prayer and hopeful expectancy for the coming of the Messiah.

*One:* We praise you for Israel, whom you gave to be a light to the nations and a teacher to the peoples.

*All:* And we give thanks for Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all that has gone before, the consummation of your promises, the reflection of your glory, and the exact imprint of your being.

*One:* We give thanks to Christ for proclaiming God’s word, for sprinkling us with the blood of redemption, and for opening a door into the presence of God.

*All:* All praise and glory belong to the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen!

## Afterword

The world is the place where we meet God because it is the place where God meets us in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ did not merely inhabit human flesh; he became flesh. He made himself, as God, to be one with humanity in the concrete, historical realities of human life. Truly, God has entered into the world and it is in the world that Christians must turn to find God.<sup>1</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Jesus is a fully human high priest, and yet he is a priest of a new order by God’s special plan: deathless, eternal, and sinless. But who the heck is Melchizedek? In preparation you may wish to read Heb. 4:14–5:10 and 7:1–28.

1. From *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*, by James Finley, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God’s People*, by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 990), p. 44.

# session *two*

Heb. 4:14—5:10;  
7:1–28

## The Door of Christ OUR HIGH PRIEST

### Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In the eyes of the author of Hebrews, Jesus is the high priest who rises above every other priest in the history of Israel. But what does a priest do? What is the role and purpose of the priesthood?

Essentially, a priest is called to bring human beings and God together. On behalf of the people, the priest handles holy things, leads worship, intercedes in prayer, and offers sacrifices of atonement and reconciliation. On behalf of God, the priest speaks God's word of judgment and grace, communicates God's love, and assures the people of God's forgiveness.

A priest is a mediator who bridges the gulf between heaven and earth, between the Creator and the creature, between the Holy One and sinners. The preeminent task of the priesthood in ancient Israel was to assist in the elaborate practice of sacrifices and offerings. Typically, a repentant person brought an unblemished animal to the priest. After identifying with the animal by laying a hand on it, the worshiper slaughtered the animal and butchered it under the supervision of the priest. The priest sprinkled the animal's blood against the altar and then burned the remains of the animal. While there were variations in the rituals of sacrifice, this is a fair summary of the practice.

As you might expect, certain job requirements were to be fulfilled if a person were to be a good and faithful priest.

1. The position was hereditary. One was born to the priesthood. A person did not choose—but was chosen by God—to be a priest.
2. A priest must be sympathetic to the whole range of human weaknesses and failings. An arrogant or heartless priest would be a self-contradiction.
3. A priest must recognize his own sinfulness and offer personal sacrifices in order to atone for his own sins.
4. A priest must be humble and submissive before God. A priest can only lead others toward obedience if he himself is obedient.

In a profound sense, the priest was a human door through which the community was brought into the presence of God, and the reality of God was made manifest in the midst of the community. Any thoughtful person might well balk at undertaking such a solemn responsibility. Indeed, we must assume that every Jewish priest inevitably fell short of the expectations that were laid on him. In spite of the dedicated ministries of many devoted priests through the ages, the door to God was always partially blocked by the doorkeepers.

And then Jesus came!

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Heb. 4:14—5:10. (It might be helpful beforehand to point out that Melchizedek is pronounced mel-KIZ-uh-dek.) After the group has heard the passage read aloud, invite everyone to read the passage a second time silently.

Recalling the job description of the ideal priest, find phrases in this passage that show the qualifications of Jesus. (Are all these relevant to Jesus?)

#### 1. Called to priesthood

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#### 2. Sympathetic to others

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#### 3. Deals with personal sinfulness

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#### 4. Humble and submissive to God

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*In Greek the same word means both tested and tempted. Does it surprise you to think of Jesus being tempted to sin? Explain your thinking.*

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*How has Jesus made it possible to “approach the throne of grace with boldness” (Heb. 4:16)?*

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*Jesus lived twenty centuries ago in a very different culture. Do you believe that Jesus can truly sympathize with every temptation that you face? Why or why not?*

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*In what sense did Jesus choose to become a priest? In what sense was Jesus chosen by God to be a priest?*

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*What scene comes to mind when you imagine Jesus offering up “prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7)?*

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*What does it mean to you that Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering?*

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*Have you ever learned about obedience through suffering?*

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*Are there lessons that can be learned only through submission to hardship and suffering? Explain your answer.*

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## Who the Heck Is Melchizedek?

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

According to Jewish law, only those who belonged to the tribe of Levi could serve as priests, and usually members of the priesthood could trace their lineage directly back to Aaron, the first priest of Israel.

This presented a problem for the early church. Jesus was their great high priest fulfilling the whole priestly tradition, and yet Jesus was born of the tribe of Judah, not the priestly tribe of Levi. Under Jewish law Jesus could not serve as a priest at all.

The Letter to the Hebrews brilliantly resolves this apparent contradiction by appealing to an enigmatic figure in an obscure story in Genesis. In the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, Abraham encounters Melchizedek, king of Salem (Jerusalem) and “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18). Melchizedek pronounces a blessing on Abraham, and the patriarch in turn gives to the priest a tenth part of his spoils from a recent battle.

This simple story of ancient Near Eastern courtesy took on a deeper meaning for the writer of Hebrews. The name “Melchizedek” literally means “king of righteousness.” “King of Salem” may be literally translated as “King of peace.” These titles are fit for the Son of God!

Furthermore, since the Genesis story fails to tell us anything about Melchizedek’s genealogy, he is technically without parents—that is, an eternal figure with “neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Heb. 7:3).

Melchizedek shows his superiority to Abraham by blessing the patriarch, for the greater always blesses the lesser, never the other way around.

The levitical priests were permitted to collect tithes, a sign of their priestly authority. However, since their ancestor Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, his priestly office must be even higher than that of the Levites.

All this taken together means that Melchizedek was a priest of a special case, outside the normal laws of levitical priesthood. By the same token, Jesus is also a special case, in the same category as Melchizedek. Even the psalmist says to the Messiah, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:17; see also Ps. 110:4). Not only is Jesus a legitimate priest, but his priesthood—like that of Melchizedek—is superior to the levitical priesthood!

By modern standards this is a creative and fanciful interpretation of Gen. 14, without evident basis in the story itself. Nevertheless, this kind of biblical interpretation was not uncommon among Jews and Christians in the first century. There’s no

point in criticizing an ancient style of reading the Bible. It is more important that we understand the point being made here. By appealing to the example of Melchizedek, the writer of Hebrews finds evidence of the superiority of Jesus Christ over the levitical priesthood. In fact, Jesus achieves a whole different order of priestly ministry.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for volunteers to read Heb. 7:1–22, taking turns one paragraph at a time.

List traits suggesting that Jesus is a priest similar to Melchizedek.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

List ways in which the priesthood of Melchizedek is superior to the levitical priesthood.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

According to Heb. 7:11, what is the need of an alternative priesthood represented by Melchizedek and Jesus?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

According to Heb. 7:16, what is the basis of Jesus' claim to the priesthood?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think of Jesus as a priest? Is this a helpful way of understanding Jesus Christ?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

When you pray, do you consciously approach God through Jesus Christ? What does it mean to you that Jesus is the mediator between God and human beings?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



\* A HIGH PRIEST FOREVER

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Unlike the levitical priests, Jesus is able to fulfill every requirement of the priestly office. Jesus was born for this task! He is the perfect and complete mediator between God and humanity. Like the earlier priests, Jesus is able to sympathize (and empathize!) with human weakness and temptation. But unlike the descendants of Levi, Jesus brings no failings or limitations to the priesthood. Jesus Christ is the priest for whom men and women have waited ever since the gates of Eden slammed shut behind us.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

In unison, read aloud Heb. 7:23–28.

How is death an obstacle for the priests of Levi?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How is sin an obstacle for the priests of Levi?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How does Jesus overcome the obstacles of sin and death?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What does each of these descriptive phrases mean when applied to Jesus?

Holy \_\_\_\_\_  
Blameless \_\_\_\_\_



Undefiled \_\_\_\_\_  
Separated from sinners \_\_\_\_\_  
Exalted above the heavens \_\_\_\_\_

Put into your own words the idea that Jesus lives forever to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

## Concluding the Session

Christ is the model of all priesthood in the church, but we also believe that Christ shares his priesthood with us. We call this the priesthood of all believers. We have the right and the responsibility to pray for one another and to lift each other into the presence of God. Within the community of faith, God speaks both *to* us and *through* us.

Allow time for group members to discuss the meaning of priesthood in contemporary life. How is evangelism a priestly ministry? What about prayer? serving the needy? expressing sympathy and support? Can you recall a moment in your life when someone's actions or presence helped bring you near to God?

You may close with this prayer, or one of your own.

*One:* Lord Jesus, you are the priest who opens the door to God.

*All:* You are holy, blameless, and undefiled!

*One:* You have been where we are, and you sympathize with our weaknesses.

*All:* You are a high priest forever, making intercession for us.

*One:* You give us mercy and grace in every time of need.

*All:* You are our hope and our only salvation. Amen!

## Afterword

### A PRAYER TO THE GOD WHO FELL FROM HEAVEN

If you had stayed  
tightfisted in the sky  
and watched us thrash  
with all the patience of a pipe smoker,  
I would pray  
like a golden bullet  
aimed at your heart.  
But the story says  
you cried  
and so heavy was the tear  
you fell with it to earth  
where like a baritone in a bar  
it is never time to go home.  
So you move among us  
twisting every straight line  
into Picasso,  
stealing kisses from pinched lips,  
holding our hands in the dark.  
So now when I pray  
I sit and turn my mind  
like a television knob  
till you are there  
with your large, open hands  
spreading my life before me  
like a Sunday tablecloth  
and pulling up a chair yourself  
for by now  
the secret is out.  
You are home.<sup>1</sup>

But God, the great unfathomable Mystery, chose to make himself known to human beings by actually becoming a human being himself, so that people could see what sort of character he has and what sort of meaning and purpose life contains.

In other words, if God wanted men to understand him, he had to come to their level and speak their language.

This is what he did.

In Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

## Looking Ahead

In the next session we will turn to Heb. 8:1–7, 9:1–14, and 10:1–18. Jesus is the true high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. But every priest must approach God with a worthy sin offering. What sacrifice is sufficient to bring into the heavenly Holy of Holies? What sacrifice can reconcile heaven and earth once and for all?

1. John Shea, *The God Who Fell from Heaven* (Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1979), p. 90.

2. J. B. Phillips, *For This Day* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974), p. 55.

# session *three*

Heb. 8:1-7; 9:1-14;  
10:1-18

## The Door of Christ OUR SACRIFICE

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

We have seen that Jesus Christ became the great high priest who makes peace between God and humankind. The priesthood of Christ was both human and divine, a ministry combining sympathy and holiness. In this week's readings we will discover that Jesus was not only the priest who brings a sacrifice of expiation to God on behalf of sinners; Jesus was himself the sinless sacrifice. Christ is the priest who offers himself on the altar of God.

The Old Testament contains a rich tradition of sacrificial offerings. Some of these offerings were brought in a spirit of communion with God or to celebrate the harvest. Others were laid on the altar to give thanks to God for some particular blessing. But the sacrifice that undergirded all the others was the sin offering, the means of restoring peace between a holy God and a sinful people.

Sin offerings were brought to the altar with depressing regularity. Both individual sins and corporate sins had to be atoned for through the sacrifice of an unblemished animal. And these were effective only for unintentional sins or transgressions of weakness and passion. No adequate sacrifice existed for the person who sinned intentionally and cold-bloodedly. "High-handed" sinners could only throw themselves on the mercy of God and pray for forgiveness.

Even before the building of the Temple, the Israelites brought sacrifices to the Tabernacle (or the Tent of Meeting) during the wilderness wanderings. Within the Tabernacle one found a second tent or chamber called the Holy of Holies. This area, hidden behind a curtain, was the presumed dwelling place of God. Almost no one was allowed to come directly into the Holy of Holies.

Only the high priest might venture into the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. And even the high priest could enter the inner chamber only if he brought with him the blood of a sin offering with which to appease God. The blood offering served to turn away the wrath of God for inadvertent sins committed by the priest or by the people.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group members to read silently Heb. 9:1-14.

*Within the Holy of Holies were special reminders of God's loving grace. What was contained in the Holy of Holies? How many of these items do you recognize?*

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*Why does the writer say that the offering of gifts and sacrifices in the tabernacle "cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (Heb. 9:9)?*

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*The outer tent of the Tabernacle both guards and blocks the way to the inner Holy of Holies. The writer compares this outer tent to the old covenant before the coming of Jesus. How do you understand this comparison?*

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*When Jesus carried out his ministry of sacrificial atonement, he did not do so in the earthly Tabernacle. Where did Jesus bring the offering of his own blood?*

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*How is the blood of Christ superior to the blood of sacrificial animals?*

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*The sacrifices of the old covenant were only effective in atoning for inadvertent sins. What about the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Are there any limits on the forgiveness of God through Jesus?*

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*What does it mean to be purified from “dead works” (Heb. 9:14)?*

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*Are there “dead works” in your life from which your conscience needs to be purified?*

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all. In this vein, we read that the Jewish priests “offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’ ” (Heb. 8:5).

All the practices of the old covenant are at best pale imitations of the reality represented by the new covenant, and the sacrificial system of Moses is no more than the hazy foreshadowing of the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

With the above information in mind, invite the members of your group to skim Heb. 9:1–14 once again and to read carefully Heb. 8:1–7.

*What is the “greater and perfect tent” that is “not made with hands” (Heb. 9:11) to which the writer refers?*

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*In Heb. 8:1–2, how does the writer describe the locale of Jesus’ ministry?*

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*Make a list of the key words in Heb. 8:1–7 that the writer uses to show the superiority of the ministry of Jesus over the earlier ministry of earthly priests.*

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*Does this way of thinking help you to sort out what is “real” from what is “unreal” in your own life?*

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*Are there acts or patterns in the Christian church that seem to point beyond themselves to a heavenly reality?*

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### \* JESUS IS THE REAL THING

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Hebrews leads us on an excursion into Greek philosophy in chapter 9. Once again the purpose is to show the superiority of Jesus Christ over the Old Testament, but the writer’s ideas in this section can be confusing. A little background in Greek thinking will shed light on these verses.

Plato, and many other philosophers who followed in his footsteps, believed that all earthly things are mere copies or shadows. The only true things exist in the heavenly realm. In the heavenly sphere there is, for instance, the true and perfect form of a tree. All earthly trees are imperfect reflections of this true and perfect tree. Thus, there is a real world of which our world is no more than a hazy and faulty copy. Our “reality” is no more than a shadow of the true reality that lies beyond our senses.

The writer to the Hebrews calls on this way of thinking in order to show that the Old Testament practice of sacrifice was merely a shadowy image of the great sacrifice that Christ offered once and for

## The Perfect Sacrifice

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

We find it difficult to understand the importance of blood as an agent of purification in biblical thought. We think of blood as a stain rather than as a stain remover! In the mindset of ancient Judaism, blood is the seat of life. This is why Jews were commanded to drain the blood from their meat before eating. The blood is the life of the animal and all life belongs to God alone. To claim the blood of an animal is to put oneself in the place of God.

Therefore, the pouring or sprinkling of blood represented the most precious sacrifice of all—the gift of life itself. Sin causes a breach between us and God, and our lives are forfeited through our disobedience. But God graciously allowed Israel to express its repentance through the offering of a substitute life—a bull, a sheep, a goat—on the altar.

Unfortunately, fallen human nature is fickle and weak. Imagine a worshiper who has just offered a sin offering in order to make peace with God. For a time all is well. But how many hours—or minutes—will pass before the forgiven sinner once again transgresses God’s will? How long before another unblemished animal must be brought to the altar? Thus the Israelite is trapped in an endless round of burnt offerings that never permanently blots out the stain of sin.

Only Christ can break this vicious cycle! The ministry of earthly priests procures temporary and limited forgiveness, but the sacrifice of Christ accomplishes forgiveness and atonement for eternity. The visible and earthly death of Jesus on the cross is only the shadowy reflection of what Christ has done in the true Holy of Holies in the heavenly places. In our name and for our sake, Christ has swept aside the curtain that separates God and humanity and offered his own life to reconcile us to God.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have everyone read silently Heb. 9:23–28 and 10:1–18.

*Reviewing Heb. 9:23–28, list several ways in which the ministry of Christ is superior to the ministry of the priests under the old covenant.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

*Under the old covenant, only unblemished animals could be sacrificed as sin offerings. In what sense was Jesus an unblemished sacrifice?*

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*Hebrews 10:1 tells us that the law “has only a shadow of the good things to come.” Does this make the old covenant laws more or less important?*

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*The earthly Holy of Holies was hidden behind a curtain that separated worshipers from the presence of God. Christ has “entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24). Can you explain why “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 23:45) during the crucifixion of Jesus?*

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*In Heb. 10:14 the word perfected suggests being made complete, and sanctified means being made holy. How have you seen this happen in the lives of Christians?*

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*In the new covenant, the law of God is to be written on our hearts rather than on tablets of stone. How is this true in your own experience?*

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*In the light of Heb. 10:17, do you believe it is truly possible for God to “forget” our sins? Explain your thinking.*

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*What does it mean to you personally that Christ has opened a way for you to come directly into the presence of God?*

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## Concluding the Session

Sometimes we can best understand the actions of God by comparing them to human experiences. As we ponder the sacrifice of Christ, perhaps we should recall how others have made sacrifices on our behalf. Allow the group to share memories of occasions when they were the recipients of sacrificial love. What mark has this made on their lives? How has this prepared them to make sacrifices for others? What has Jesus Christ done for us that no one else can do?

You may conclude the session with a unison reading of this prayer.

Lamb of God, by your own blood you have taken away the sins of the world. Your loving sacrifice has washed away the sins of others and also my own sins. In thankfulness for your great act of self-giving, I give myself to you to be perfected, sanctified, and used in your service. Amen.

## Afterword

The agony was over. He no longer felt the terrible pangs of crucifixion nor heard the taunts and insults of a blood-thirsty mob. The fiendish minds of men had done their worst. Their fury had been spent—and so, too, the fury of a righteous God upon sin and disobedience. No longer were felt the thorns upon His brow, the stripes upon His back, the nails through His flesh. No longer was felt the soul torture and bitterness of separation from His heavenly Father. His heart had now ceased to beat. “It is finished.”

“But there were, in that stifling silence following Jesus’ death, other sounds: the sounds of bursting fetters, breaking chains, crumbling prison walls, the rending of veils, the overthrowing of barriers, the opening of gates. Christ’s last words were not the words of defeat, but the cry of victory, the shout of triumph, the sound of a trumpet. “It is finished”—finished was the work of redemption, the last payment for the guilt of sinful man and woman. “Finished” was the terrible ban of judgment upon the ages, the power of darkness and desolation, the curse of sin upon humanity.<sup>1</sup>

## Looking Ahead

In the next session we will turn our attention to Heb. 2:5–18, 8:1–13, and 10:19–25. Jesus Christ has opened the door of forgiveness that leads us with confidence and boldness into the presence of God. What does it mean to you to belong to a new covenant of grace and intimacy with Jesus Christ? What does it mean to have the will of God written on our hearts?

1. Leslie F. Brandt, *Meditations on a Loving God* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), p. 118.

# session *four*

Heb. 2:5–18, 8:1–13;  
10:19–25

## The Door

## TO FORGIVENESS

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

How glibly we speak of the incarnation! How casually we declare that God became human in Jesus Christ! But the Letter to the Hebrews reawakens our wonder at this unlikely and scandalous thing that God has done. Christ has come to be our brother!

Let that sink in. The One through whom all things were created willingly became a part of the creation. The Ancient of Days stepped down from eternity and subjected himself to the authority of the hourglass. The One whom heaven and earth could not contain became a zygote in the belly of a peasant woman.

The Highest Power gladly accepted all the limitations of human existence: fatigue, hunger, illness, sore muscles, fear, self-doubt, poverty, pain, and death. The Son of God did not simply put on a human body as you or I might don a Halloween costume; Christ *became* flesh just as you and I are flesh.

In the words of Paul, “. . . though he was in the form of God, (Christ) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being born in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8).

Christ lowered himself more than we can imagine, but that is only half the story. In becoming human, Christ also lifted us up more than we can imagine. Quoting from Ps. 8, the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of God’s promise to subject all things to human control. In Christ, this prophecy has come true. Christ was for a little while lower than the angels, but now he is crowned with glory and honor forever.

Again in Paul’s words, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11).

In becoming our Brother, Christ has shown us the glory of a human life lived in perfect obedience to God. Christ reveals what God intended for us to be from the beginning and what, by grace, we will someday become as we grow into the likeness of our Brother.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for two volunteers to read aloud Heb. 2:5–18. Have one person read the quoted sections and the other read the rest of the text.

*In pondering human beings, the writer of Hebrews notes both our smallness (verse 6) and our greatness (verse 7). Which do you think should be stressed more?*

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*Is suffering an inevitable aspect of being human?*

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*Why do you think the writer places so much emphasis on the suffering of Jesus?*

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*Jesus is called the “pioneer of their salvation” (Heb. 2:10). The Greek word translated as “pioneer” carries a range of meanings: leader, head, founder, trailblazer. In your own words, explain how Jesus is the pioneer of your salvation.*

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*In his death, Jesus overcame death forever. Do you feel that you have been freed from the slavery and fear of death? Are there areas of your life in which death still reigns? Can you explain?*

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## The New Covenant

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

We have already looked at a portion of Heb. 8 in order to understand the writer's philosophy of reality and shadows. We return to this passage now with a different focus.

The idea of dividing our Scriptures into Old Testament and New Testament is deeply ingrained in our thinking. Where did the idea for this division originate? The roots of old covenant/new covenant thinking can be found in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, quoted at length in Heb. 8.

In the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the Law of God was carved on tablets of stone, written there by God's own finger during the days of Moses. The tablets of the Law were enshrined in the Ark of the Covenant, honored but hidden away in the Holy of Holies, out of sight, out of mind. And the Jewish nation was in moral bankruptcy.

But in a burst of hope Jeremiah says, "Someday, the Law won't be relegated to crumbling scrolls or slabs of stone. Someday God will write the Law on our hearts" (Jer. 31:31-34, paraphrased). This is what the Holy Spirit does in the New Covenant we have in Christ. Having erased the scars that others have put there, having wiped away the wounds that we have inflicted on ourselves, the Holy Spirit of Jesus inscribes our hearts with God's living, redeeming, liberating guidance.

This is a new covenant! This is the good news that prompts us to divide the salvation story into Old and New Testaments. This is the new covenant of intimacy and grace instituted by Jesus Christ, our heavenly High Priest and compassionate Brother.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Once again, use two voices to read Heb. 8:1-13, one reader for the words of the letter writer and one for the long quote from Jeremiah.

*If the first covenant "had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one" (Heb. 8:7). From your perspective as a Christian, what are the advantages of our new covenant in Jesus Christ?*

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*What is the point of the prophet's declaration that in the new covenant "they shall not teach one another" (Heb. 8:11)?*

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*In the writing of the law on our hearts, is the responsibility solely on God, or can we help this process happen?*

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*If you believe we can be partners with God in inscribing the law on our hearts and minds, what role do we play? What spiritual practices clear the way for God's writing?*

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*We believe that the Old Testament and New Testament are both fully Scripture and equally important for our growth and study. Is this really the practice of the church? Explain your answer.*

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*Some students of the Bible believe that the new covenant in Christ has canceled and replaced the old. Others believe that the old covenant remains in force for those who wish to serve God in that way. What do you think? Why?*

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## \* THROUGH THE CURTAIN

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

In the light of what we have read so far in Hebrews, we Christians ought to be people of the utmost confidence and assurance. If Christ is our high priest, what can we fear or dread? If Christ has opened the way into the presence of God, what can come between us and God? Let us come boldly into the throne room of the Most High and live as people for whom death and sin have been overcome!

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Once more, the writer reminds us of the curtain that shielded the Holy of Holies in Temple and tabernacle, but this time he identifies the open curtain with the very flesh of Christ (Heb. 10:19–25). What does this say to you?*

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*In your own worship and prayers, do you come to God with confidence and full assurance? If not, what stands in the way?*

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*Verse 22 seems to have in mind the Sacrament of Baptism. Is your baptism an important aspect of your confidence and boldness? Why or why not?*

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*Do you feel that the support and encouragement of other Christians can deepen our assurance of God's faithfulness? Explain your thinking.*

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## Concluding the Session

Invite the members of your group to reflect silently on those areas of their lives in which they wish to grow in confidence and assurance. Allow time for those who wish to share their thoughts with the group.

You may conclude this session by joining hands and praying aloud the Lord's Prayer.

## Afterword

The story of the church is the story of people for whom God has erased and rewritten:

- the fanatical persecutor of Christians who became the foremost Christian evangelist of the New Testament
- the obsessive, terrified monk who rediscovered grace and love, reforming the church and changing the course of history
- a slave monger who turns his back on the flesh trade to become a preacher for Jesus Christ
- a sheltered, genteel English lady who ends up ministering to hopeless inmates in the hellhole of Newgate Prison
- a former prostitute who operates an inner-city mission to free women from that destructive and demeaning way of life
- a victim of abuse and incest who leaves behind the rage and self-hatred in order to love and be loved in a fresh start

Where you have been does not decide where you are going. What you have done before is not the last word on what you may yet do. You are an unfinished story with possibilities that only God can write. The death of Christ has erased the sins and mistakes of the past, and through the resurrection of Christ our deepest selves become clean pages where the love of God is being indelibly autographed.<sup>1</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Our world offers us so many delectable choices! Sometimes we wonder if some door—other than Christ—might lead us to salvation. In the next session we examine doors that lead nowhere. You may wish to read Heb. 1:1–14, 3:7–19, and 4:1–11 in preparation for that discussion.

1. From an unpublished sermon by the Rev. Michael Fitzpatrick. Permission granted.



# session

## five

### Doors to NOWHERE

Heb. 1:1-14; 3:7-19;  
4:1-11

#### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

While visiting a fellow pastor's church, I commented on the lovely worship space. My friend smiled and told me that the architecture was an old-fashioned style that laid great importance on symmetry. "Notice," he said, "the two doors behind the chancel."

I looked in that direction and saw two white doors perfectly matched and balanced for a symmetrical effect. "Where do those doors lead?" I asked.

My friend smiled again. "The one behind the lectern leads to a storage area. The other door goes nowhere."

With a dramatic flourish he opened the indicated door. Behind it was a blank brick wall. The passage was an immediate dead end, a door added only for visual effect. I chuckled over the door to nowhere, but I have often remembered that image when I find myself involved in some activity that I know will end up as a dead end. More often than I care to admit, I find myself knocking on doors that go nowhere.

Christ is the door that gives direct access to God; other doors may look promising but they lead nowhere worth going to. Sometimes we encounter these beckoning doors in the world around us. At other times we build our own dead ends through unhealthy attitudes and destructive habits.

The Letter to the Hebrews warns us about some of these deceptive doors, and we will do well to pay attention. What a tragedy to throw ourselves through a door that we think will lead us to life, only to crash headlong into a brick wall!

#### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Exodus 17 tells the story of the thirsty Israelites who nearly mobbed Moses in their anger that God had not provided water for them to drink in the wilderness. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to

kill us . . . with thirst?" the people ask (Ex. 17:3). "Is the LORD among us or not?" they demand (Ex. 17:7).

With this background in mind, invite the group to read Heb. 3:7-19 silently.

*The very people who complained of thirst were the same ones who had seen God's mighty acts in Egypt and at the Red Sea. Why are we so quick to doubt God's care?*

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*In what way is a rebellious and unbelieving heart a door that leads nowhere?*

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*What leads to an unbelieving heart? Is there a cure? If so, what is it?*

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*Verse 13 warns us of the "deceitfulness of sin." How does sin deceive us? How does sin lure us to dead-end doors?*

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*Hebrews 3:14 claims that we "have become partners of Christ." What does this mean to you? What qualities of heart are necessary for a true partnership?*

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We are to “hold our first confidence firm to the end” (Heb. 3:14). Have you known Christians who made a good start in their faith but fell away before finishing the journey? Can you give examples?

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“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 4:7). What causes us to postpone obedience to God?

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How is postponed faith a dead-end door?

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Are there matters in your own life in which you are postponing the will of God?

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What is the chief danger of planning to serve God later?

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## Angels, Angels Everywhere

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

“Just tell me plainly,” the woman in the new member class asked me. “Does our church believe in angels or not?”

“Yes,” I said, “but don’t believe everything about angels that you see on television and in the movies.”

Angels are part of God’s good creation, beings created for the same purpose as humans: to serve and glorify God. Given all the stories of angels in the Bible, one certainly couldn’t deny that angels are sometimes involved in the lives of men and women. Yet the current obsession with angels in our culture smacks of something unhealthy.

In the popular mind, angels function as “little gods” who go about doing random acts of kindness, but require no commitment, faith, or repentance from the people whose lives they touch. This hardly matches the picture of angels in the Bible who constantly confronted human beings with the grace or calling or judgment of God.

Any good thing can become destructive—even demonic—if it is allowed to usurp the rightful place of God in our lives. This is true of food, money, relationships, and even angels. If our preoccupation with angels moves us to put our faith in these unseen spirits instead of in God, then we have fallen into the sin of idolatry.



## \* POSTPONED FAITH

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Just as we must beware of the faith that starts strong and then weakens too soon, we must also avoid the opposite extreme: the faith that never gets started in the first place. The procrastination that delays believing in God, postpones committing to God, stalls on obeying God.

Psalm 95 refers to the story of the rebellion at Meribah and calls on us do better than our spiritual ancestors in ancient Israel. “O that today you would listen to his voice!” (Ps. 95:7). We all struggle with the tendency to serve God later.

“I’ll settle into a church after I’m out of school and raising a family. Right now I just want to have some fun.”

“I’ll be able to spend more time in prayer and study when the kids are a little older and business isn’t so hectic.”

“I can retire in just a few years, and then I’ll be able to give my faith the kind of time and energy I’ve always wanted to give.”

“We want to travel and enjoy ourselves now that we have the time and money, but we’re planning to include the church in our will.”

We are slow to learn that today is the only day we have, and if we are to serve God and follow Christ we must do so today. Yesterday is lost and tomorrow is an illusion. Today is the only day we can truly offer to God. If we withhold today, then we will never make a commitment.

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read Heb. 4:1–11 silently. Then ask a volunteer to read the same verses aloud while the group members listen with eyes closed.

Judging from the vehemence of the message in Hebrews, the first century was apparently plagued by the same unhealthy angelic preoccupation. Rightly understood, angels are our fellow creatures and servants, perhaps even companions along the way. But they are not our saviors. Any such belief is a door that leads nowhere.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read aloud to the group Heb. 1:1–14.

*Why does the writer take such pains to prove Jesus' superiority over the angels?*

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*What is the difference between "begotten" and "created"?*

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*Reviewing verse 3, jot down the words showing the uniqueness of Christ when compared to any creature.*

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*How do you account for the sudden popularity of angels in our culture?*

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*Do you believe that angels intervene directly and visibly in human life? Why or why not? If so, what is God's role in this?*

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## Concluding the Session

Allow the members of the group to recall promising doors in their lives that turned out to be dead ends. Those who wish may share their thoughts with the group. You may conclude with the following prayer.

Christ our Door, forgive us when we turn to dead ends and follow paths that lead nowhere. May we hear your voice today and love you above all else. Amen.

## Afterword

I, John, saw all these things with my own eyes, heard them with my own ears. Immediately when I heard and saw, I fell on my face to worship at the feet of the Angel who laid it all out before me. He objected, "No you don't! I'm just a servant like you and your companions, the prophets, and all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"<sup>1</sup>

Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances money, patriotism, sexual freedom, moral principles, family loyalty, physical health, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around, but to make them the standard by which all other values are measured, to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your soul is sheerest folly. They just aren't up to it.<sup>2</sup>

## Looking Ahead

What does a mature Christian look like? Is it realistic to aim for "perfection" in the Christian life? In preparation for discussing the next section, you may wish to read Heb. 5:11–6:12 and 10:26–39.

1. Revelation 22:8–9 from *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English*, by Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), p. 543.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 40.

# session

## SIX

### The Path of MATURITY

Heb. 5:11—6:12; 10:26–39

#### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Jesus Christ is the only door that leads us directly into the Holy of Holies and gives us face-to-face access to God. Beware of any other door that promises to usher us into the throne room of the Most High!

But what is our own responsibility in regard to the door of Christ? What role do we play in approaching God? We must avoid anything that smacks of salvation by works, but what can we do for ourselves to improve our approach to God? Are there helpful paths to which we can commit ourselves?

One such course might well be called the path of maturity. The writer to the Hebrews has favorite words to which he returns repeatedly. One such word is the Greek term that is usually translated as “maturity” or “perfection.”

This may have been a technical term in early Christianity describing an advanced level of membership in the church. Practice differed in various parts of the early church, but we know that a period of training and preparation was often required before new converts were admitted to full membership and participation in the Lord’s Supper. Even after attaining full membership in the church, a Christian might aspire to greater maturity and leadership within the congregation.

Perhaps John is referring to these different levels of maturity when he writes to “little children” and “young people” and “fathers” within the same congregation (1 John 2:12–14). In a similar vein, Paul mentions both “the mature” (1 Cor. 2:6) and the “infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). In the first passage we will discuss today, the title “teacher” (Heb. 5:12) may suggest a Christian of advanced maturity.

Even if these terms do not denote actual “ranks” within the early church, New Testament writers certainly show a genuine concern for the continued growth and maturity of those who have decided to follow Jesus Christ. Baptism is not the end of the road for the those who follow Christ, but merely the beginning.

#### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Hebrews 5:11–14 is a brief passage. If you have several different translations available in your group, you may wish to read the passage aloud several times from a variety of versions and compare different nuances.

*The writer apparently recalls a time when his readers were more aware of spiritual truths, but they have “become dull in understanding” (Heb. 5:11). In your opinion, what causes Christians to wane in zeal and to become spiritually insensitive?*

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*From your own thinking, make a list of five words or phrases that describe your vision of a mature Christian.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

*As you review your faith journey, how would you describe your own level of maturity in Christ? In which areas of your discipleship do you see the greatest need for growth?*

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*What advice would you give to a Christian who expresses a desire to grow into greater maturity?*

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If individual Christians can grow in maturity, what about congregations? What do you think are the signs of a mature congregation?

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## Building on the Foundation

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Calton Hill overlooks the Scottish city of Edinburgh. On top of the hill, clearly visible from much of the city below, is the unfinished National Monument. The foundation stone of this memorial to the dead of the Napoleonic wars was laid amid much fanfare in 1822. Intended to be a great church in the style of the Parthenon, twelve looming pillars were constructed before funds ran out. The unfinished monument is commonly referred to as Edinburgh’s folly, and the imposing columns remain as an embarrassing reminder of an ambitious but never-to-be-completed undertaking.

A Christian life begins with a foundation of basic beliefs and doctrine, but the foundation is only the first stage of a building. Jesus warns his followers about the ridicule invited by a foundation that remains unfinished. Bypassers will say, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:30).

The readers of Hebrews are encouraged to press on toward the mature completion of their discipleship, moving beyond the elementary beliefs which were the original foundation of their commitment. Surely there is no need to lay that foundation all over again. Time now to build on the basics and raise a structure that will honor Christ and serve God.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite your group members to read Heb. 6:1–12 silently and then ask a volunteer to read the passage aloud to the group.

What beliefs are listed as foundational for Christian faith?

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Would you add other foundational beliefs?

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The life of a Christian is compared to a piece of ground that bears either a useful crop or worthless thistles. What is the point of this comparison? What is the meaning of soaking up the rain?

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Note the humility in verse 3 suggested by “if God permits.” Compare James 4:13–14. Perhaps this humility is one sign of maturity. Do you consciously leave room for God in your plans? Explain your answer.

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The writer encourages us to be “imitators of those who . . . inherit the promises” (Heb. 6:12). Are there Christian that serve as role models to you? What is the value of “imitating” a mature Christian?

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### \* BEYOND REPENTANCE ?

Because the Letter to the Hebrews is written to Christians who may be considering a return to the Jewish faith, the writer takes a drastic stand against the possibility of leaving the Christian church. In the strongest possible terms, the writer warns that those who intentionally turn away from Christian discipleship face “a fearful prospect of judgment” (Heb. 10:27). We saw this warning in the last section (Heb. 6:4–6), and we see it expressed even more emphatically in Heb. 10:26–39.

Frankly, these are difficult verses to interpret with certainty. An understanding of these passages requires more than a careful study of Greek words. The community of faith must wrestle with these hard teachings, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us to the truth.

So, get ready to wrestle!

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Heb. 10:26–39.

*In verse 26, some scholars feel that the particular sin in mind is apostasy, the intentional rejection of the Christian faith. What do you think? Why?*

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*What does it mean to you to spurn the Son of God and profane the blood of the covenant (verse 29)?*

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*The Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible. Do other passages from Scripture need to be read alongside this one?*

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*How do you feel personally about the possibility of a person being beyond the reach of repentance and grace?*

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## Concluding the Session

During a time of silence, invite each of the participants to make a personal commitment to concentrate on growing toward greater maturity in some area of Christian life. Those who wish may share their thoughts with the group.

You may close with a prayer in this spirit:

Lord Jesus Christ, you know our struggles and weaknesses. Forgive our failings, and give us strength and courage to press on toward full maturity in your service. Amen

## Afterword

Commenting on the Greek word for maturity or perfection in the New Testament, William Barclay says:

It has nothing to do with abstract and metaphysical and philosophic perfection. It is used, for instance, of an animal which is unblemished and fit to be offered as a sacrifice; of a scholar who is no longer at the elementary stage but mature; of a human being or an animal who is full grown; of a Christian who is no longer on the fringe of the Church but who is baptized. The basic meaning . . . is always that the thing or person so described *fully carries out the purpose for which designed*.<sup>1</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Faith is the indispensable ingredient in a Christian life. Faith links us with those who have gone before us. Faith keeps us in the race all the way to the finish line. Only by faith can we please God and claim the grace of Jesus Christ. You may read Heb. 11:1–40 and 12:1–12 in preparation for the next session.

1. William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 26.

# session *seven*

## The Path of FAITHFULNESS

Heb. 11:1–40; 12:1–12

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Our writer has relied heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures throughout this letter, but now he invokes the Old Testament story in earnest. In chapter 11 the writer to the Hebrews takes us on a whirlwind tour of Jewish history with short stops at the creation, the patriarchs, the exodus, the conquest of the promised land, the judges, and the monarchy!

Faith is the theme of this historical review. The writer assures us that the great Jewish heroes pleased God, not by their good works, but by their faith. Faith is the essential ingredient. Without faith, nothing we do—no matter how heroic or sacrificial—can possibly be pleasing to God. Good works matter not in their own right, but because they are the fruit and proof of a healthy faith.

According to Heb. 11:1, “. . . faith is the assurance of things hoped for . . .” The word for assurance might also be translated “groundwork.” Once again we come to the idea of building on a foundation, and the foundation (or groundwork) on which the Christian must build is none other than faith. For the author of this letter, faith is both an acceptance of right beliefs about God in Christ, and also an enduring adherence to those beliefs that shows itself in the Christian’s manner of living.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read Heb. 11:1–3, 29–40 silently.

*Faith is “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). What unseen things do you think the writer had in mind?*

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*What connection does the writer make between unseen things and the creation of the world?*

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*The writer lists an impressive catalog of mighty works that were accomplished by faith. Have you ever seen a great thing accomplished by faith?*

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*The Old Testament heroes of the faith did not fully receive the promise they believed in. What promise does the writer have in mind?*

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*Have there been moments in your journey when your faith has been especially tested?*

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*What counsel would you give to a friend who is struggling to believe in God’s promises, but does not see those promises at work in his life?*

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### \* A PARADE OF THE FAITHFUL

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

The writer to the Hebrews never tires of pointing us toward healthy role models to inspire us on our faith journey. Of course, Jesus is the highest role

model of all, but many other faith heroes can also remind us of how a faithful life should be lived. Hebrews 11 invites us to find strength in the example of those who have gone before us and to take our own place in the long parade of the faithful.

**Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group**

Invite your group to skim Heb. 11:4–31. Many of these characters will feel like old friends to you, but some will be strangers or new acquaintances. Using the information below, allow your group time to review any of the stories that catch their interest. Then invite each person in the group to tell something that inspires them about one character or story in this list.

- Abel—Gen. 4:1–10
- Enoch—Gen. 5:21–24
- Noah—Gen. 6:11–22
- Abraham—Gen. 11:31–12:4; 18:1–15; 21:1–7
- Offering of Isaac—Gen. 22:1–14
- Blessing of Jacob and Esau—Gen. 27:27–40
- Blessing of Joseph’s sons—Gen. 48:8–22
- Moses—Ex. 2:1–15, 12:21–28
- Crossing of the Red Sea—Ex. 14:21–29
- Rahab—Josh. 2:1–14
- Fall of Jericho—Josh. 6:1–21

### All the Way to the Finish Line

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Anyone who has ever been in training for an athletic competition can appreciate the metaphor in Heb. 12. The writer compares the Christian life to running a race. The analogy works on several levels.

For one thing, no one who is entering a race wants to carry excess weight. Light clothing is the order of the day, lest the excess garments weigh us down and bind our limbs. In the same way, we who run with Christ must put away the clinging sins that would burden and slow us.

Jesus is the front-runner who sets the course and leads the way. Running this race means following in the footsteps of Jesus. A friend was running a race whose course wandered through a residential area. At one point my friend made a wrong turn because she was following a group of runners who had gotten lost. Valuable time and energy were forfeited because my friend followed the wrong leaders. Consider how much we stand to lose if we fail to follow Jesus.

And most important of all, a serious runner must finish the race. We can’t all be in first place, but with proper training and determination we can all aspire to cross the finish line. Obstacles will sometimes block our path and the way may seem long, but we Christians dare not lose heart or grow so weary that we abandon the race. As Jesus himself said, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).

**Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group**

Ask for several volunteers to read aloud Heb. 12:1–12, each one reading two or three verses from the text.

*Jesus is given two unusual titles in Heb. 12:2. One of them is “pioneer.” What does it mean to you to call Jesus the pioneer of our faith?*

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*What comes to mind when you think of Jesus as the “perfecter” of our faith? (Remember that the Greek word for to perfect also means “to mature” or “to make complete.”*

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*Healthy discipline is the proof of parental love, and God sometimes disciplines us in life. According to verse 11, what is the purpose of divine discipline?*

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*Do you believe that every hard or painful thing that befalls us is a discipline from God? Explain your thinking.*

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*Have you ever endured persecution or loss for the sake of your Christian faith? Do you know of others who have?*

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*The writer encourages us to lift our “drooping hands” and strengthen our “weak knees” (verse 12). What can a discouraged Christian do to revive a flagging spirit and a sagging attitude?*

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*Does it help you on the journey to keep in mind the joy that is set before you?*

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## Concluding the Session

We have perfected (that is, brought to completion!) our study of the Letter to the Hebrews. Ask the participants to review the discussions from weeks past. What new ideas or understandings have you found? Name one thing that you would explain to a person who is about to read Hebrews for the first time. What thing of lasting value will you take away from Hebrews?

You may close with this prayer.

God of the ages, you are the beginning and the end of the race. We thank you for every believer who has inspired and helped us along the way. Above all else, we thank you for sending Jesus to lead us across the finish line into your glorious presence! We pray in the name of Christ, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. Amen.

## Afterword

Excess weight on the journey can take many forms. For some, the accumulation of material possessions becomes the focus of life and interferes with spiritual pursuits. Some people use so much energy dealing with hurt feelings or guilt from unresolved conflicts that they are literally weighed down and can't make any progress in their spiritual journey. The list could go on and on. Self-defeating habits, the pursuit of temporary pleasures, self-indulgences, debilitating relationships, exhaustion, unfulfilled dreams, and associations with people who pull one away from God can all form excess weight that needs to be dropped. For Christians, the orientation of the runner must always be toward Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” says the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:1). Faith is laughter at the promise of a child called laughter . . . .

Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps. Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.<sup>2</sup>

1. Janet Neff Brewer, “A Call to Faithfulness,” in *Bible Discovery*, Adult Student's Book Vol. 9, No. 4, June–August 1997 [Louisville: Curriculum Publishing, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)], 1997, p. 73.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 25.

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