

JESUS THE GREATEST VOL. 2

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In volume one we looked at how the Book of Hebrews exalted Jesus as the greatest in every category in the first few verses. In this volume we want to see that this is the theme of the whole book, and all the way through Jesus is exalted as the greatest. Jesus is never just great along with many other great persons. He is always the greatest in every way, and everything surrounding His being and His deeds is the greatest.

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I. CHAPTER ONE. THE GREATEST PROPHET

F. F. Bruce in his commentary on Hebrews concludes (Jesus) "is the prophet through whom God has spoken His final word; He is the priest who has accomplished a perfect work of cleansing for his people's sin; He is the King who sits enthroned in the place of chief honor alongside the Majesty on High." Everyone agrees that Jesus is the prophet, priest and king in Hebrews, and this means that he sums up the whole revelation of God. But the fact is, we hear more about Jesus being the priest and king than we do about Him being the prophet of God. I have to confess that in 34 years of preaching I never dealt with this subject, and I do not recall ever reading a message on Jesus as a prophet. It is not a popular theme, but it is more significant than we realize. Hebrews begins by saying that the prophets were the spokesmen for God in the past, and that Jesus is the final spokesman of God in these last days. He is the final and the ultimate prophet, for He speaks God's final answer to man.

God told Moses, who is considered the greatest prophet in Judaism, that He would send another prophet like him, and Christians have always considered this as a reference to

Jesus. It says in Deut. 18:18, "I will raise them a Prophet from among their brothers, like you (Moses), and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whoever will not listen to my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him." Jesus was the very Word of God, and His words carried the most important message God ever spoke to mankind. Eternal life is in His words, and failure to listen to them and obey them leads to eternal rejection. It is a matter of life and death that we hear and heed this prophet who spoke, not just to Israel, but to all mankind, and who sent His church into all the world to teach them to obey all that He has commanded. No other prophet had such a powerful message, and no other prophet had such a universal message to all people. Jesus was, without a doubt, the greatest prophet. Isaac Watts wrote,

**Great Prophet of my God,
My tongue would bless Thy Name,
By Thee the joyful news
Of our salvation came,
The joyful news of sin forgiv'n
Of hell subdued, and peace with heav'n.**

Deuteronomy ends with these interesting verses. "And there has not arisen since in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, and in all that mighty hand, and in all the great and awesome deeds which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel." A prophet like Moses had to have more than words from God. He had to have deeds of miraculous wonder. Jesus fulfilled this image perfectly as He went about daily doing miraculous deeds as no one else in history has ever done. Elijah and Elisha did miracles too, but not on the scale of Jesus. He not only talked to God face to face as Moses did, but He was the very face of God confronting mankind. Never before, and never again has there been a prophet like Jesus in both word and deed. After He fed the 5000 we read in John 6:14, "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" He was the second Moses in the eyes of those who saw His wonders. Those who heard his wisdom say the same thing in John 7:40, "Surely this man is the Prophet." No one had ever come to fulfill the prophecy of one like Moses until Jesus, and the people knew He was the one. The leaders of Israel should have known as well, for in Rabbinic literature there is a much repeated principle: "As the first redeemer (Moses), so the final redeemer (the Messiah)." They should have known He was the final Prophet fulfilling the promise to Moses.

There are a number of ways that Jesus parallels Moses. Both had their lives threatened as babies and they needed to be rescued from tyrants. Both reflected the glory of God on the mountain. From the mountain where he talked to God Moses gave the people the law of God. From the mountain Jesus gave the new law in the Sermon on the Mount. It is interesting that both of them fasted for 40 days and nights before giving the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Exodus 34:28 says, "Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant-the Ten Commandments." Moses fed the people with the manna from heaven. Jesus fed the multitude with bread he created by heavenly

power. Moses led the people in the wilderness as they headed to the promise land. Jesus leads us through the wilderness of time to the ultimate promise land of heaven. There are numerous parallels, and Arthur Pink comes up with 75 of them in his final chapter on his study of Exodus. The point is Moses was the greatest in the Old Testament, and Jesus is the second Moses, who becomes the greatest Prophet of all time.

Here is a list of the testimonies of the people who recognized that Jesus was the prophet: Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" and they answer, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Matt. 16:14

"And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet." Matthew 14:5 (compare with Matthew 21:26)

"And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee." Matthew 21:11

"But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet." Matthew 21:46

"And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people:" Luke 24:19

"The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet." John 4:19

"Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world." John 6:14

"Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet." John 7:40

"And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people." Luke 7:16

"They say unto the blind man again, What sayest thou of him, that he hath opened thine eyes? He said, He is a prophet." John 9:17

John the Baptist was the greatest born of woman Jesus said, but this greatest man of the Old Testament said he was not worthy to stoop down and until his shoes, as he refers to Jesus in Mark 1:7. Everyone who knew Jesus personally knew He was the greatest prophet ever, and many who only saw his works and heard his words knew it too.

Peter makes it perfectly clear that Jesus was this promised Prophet in Acts 3. He had just healed the crippled man at the gate called Beautiful, and this led to a crowd gathering in amazement. Peter spoke to them and quoted the words of Moses in verses 22 and 23, "For Moses said, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people." Peter says that Jesus is that prophet and by His power the man had been healed. He said all of the prophets spoke of

this day, and Jesus as the final prophet came to them to turn them from their ways of wickedness. Peter knew Jesus was the Prophet Moses spoke of for He saw Jesus transformed on the mountain in the presence of Moses, and he heard God say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" (Matt. 17:5) Then when they looked up they saw Jesus only. No longer were they to look to Moses and the prophets, but to Jesus only. They were to listen to Him only, who was the greatest Prophet.

Stephen in his final speech before he was stoned to death refers in Acts 7:37 to this same promise and says, "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'" Then he goes on in verses 52 and 53, "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him." There is no doubt that the early Christians saw Jesus as the Prophet God promised Moses He would send.

When Jesus went to the town of Nain he saw the only son of a widowed mother being carried out in a coffin. His heart went out to her and he said, "Young man, I say to you, get up." The dead man did just that and he talked to his mother. The great crowd that followed him was filled with awe and they shouted in Luke 7:16, "A great prophet has appeared among us." Such a miracle was not the work of a mere prophet, for only a great prophet could do something like this, for He had raised the dead to life. It was this act of wonder and not anything that He said that made them see Him as a great prophet. The greater the wondrous acts of love and mercy, the greater the prophet, and this clearly puts Jesus in the category of the greatest prophet ever. Is there a record anywhere in history of one who did miracles on the scale that Jesus did them? The miracles of Jesus confirm that He was the great prophet that God was sending into the world. When we combine His words and His works we have a clear winner to the title of the greatest prophet in history.

The disciples saw Jesus as a prophet, for Cleopas said of Jesus in Luke 24:19, "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people." They recognized Jesus as a prophet, but they did not recognize that the prophets of the past were speaking about Him. Jesus then goes on to speak to these two on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, and He shows them that the Jesus they knew as a prophet was the one all the prophets were speaking of. He says in Luke 24:25-27. "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" The Luke goes on, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Jesus is saying here that he is the Messiah that the whole Old Testament was pointing to.

The words of Cleopas that Jesus was a prophet powerful in word and deed give us an insight about a prophet that we seldom take note of. A prophet does not just speak the truth of God, but he also acts out the truth of God. It is by both word and deed that he conveys the message of God to man. This prophetic ministry in deeds is an aspect of the prophet's life that is neglected by us, but it was a major aspect of the ministry of Jesus. Some of the old prophets had to act out their prophecies. Ezekiel had to act out the horror of the Babylonian captivity with his own body, and Hosea had to marry a harlot to act out the grace and mercy of God in loving the unfaithful Israel. Isaiah goes naked and barefoot in the streets of Jerusalem to symbolize captivity (Is 20:3ff). Someone called these enacted prophecies. They

were like the drama we see in present day churches. They were plays that conveyed a message that was also spoken, but the play was visual rather than just verbal. God used the visual way back in the Old Testament to give a picture of what He was trying to communicate. Many of the miracles of Jesus can be seen as visual images of the verbal message He spoke. They were enacted prophecies that said God loves people and cares about their every need, including those of food and health. They conveyed the message that God will deliver from the forces of evil. They prophesied that there is coming a kingdom that will be forever where love reigns supreme, and where evil is no more. All that Jesus did, as well as what He said, was prophetic about what God was going to do in the future for His people.

Jesus not only said there would be a resurrection of the dead, He acted it out and raised Lazarus. And then He raised Himself to demonstrate that death was conquered. He not only said there was a heaven, He ascended into the clouds before His disciples to demonstrate it. He not only said sin leads to death, He took sin upon Himself and died. Everything Jesus did, as well as everything He said was prophetic and the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the prophet par-excellence.

When Jesus was in His home town He claimed the title of prophet by saying in Matt. 13:57, "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He experienced the typical welcome of the prophet, for they were almost always, rejected by the people God sent them to. People do not like those who speak for God. There is something about the truth of God coming through a human channel that turns people off. It seems like audacity for any man to say, "Thus saith the Lord," and so they refuse the message because they despise the messenger. The prophets were the primary means by which God got His communication to the people. The priest were so by heredity, but the prophets were specially called by God to be His spokesmen. It was a high and holy office, but often not held in high respect by the people of God.

The folly and tragedy of God's people is summed up in II Chron. 36:15-16, "The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy." The consequence was the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and they were carried away captive to Babylon. The greatest tragedies in the history of God's people all have the same source, and that is that they would not listen to the prophets. The greatest tragedy in life for every person in history is when they do not listen to the greatest prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was a matter of life or death not to listen to the prophets of old, but not to listen to Jesus is a matter of eternal life or death.

The Prophets say such high and lofty things, for they are speaking for God. Jesus, however, did not speak for God, but as God. He was the very voice of God, and when people heard His Word, they were hearing God speak, and not just His spokesman. That is why Jesus is the greatest prophet. He was God speaking directly and not through another person. All other prophets pointed to one who would come, but Jesus is the prophet who was the fulfillment of those prophecies. People were meant to believe the words of the prophets, but they were meant to believe, not just the words of Jesus, but they were to believe in Him. Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work

which You have given Me to do” (John 17:3, 4). No other prophet could give eternal life, but Jesus could, for He was the ultimate prophet. He was the very presence of God in human flesh.

Arthur Pink has some great comments on this text. He writes, “Someone has suggested an analogy with what is recorded in Matthew 17. There we see Christ upon the holy Mount, transfigured before His disciples; and, as they continue gazing on His flashing excellency, they saw no man "save Jesus only." At first, there appeared standing with Him, Moses and Elijah, and so real and tangible were they, Peter said, "If Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But as they looked "a bright cloud overshadowed them." and a Voice was heard saying, "This is My Beloved Son: hear Him" (Luke 9:35). How significant are the words that immediately followed: "And when the Voice was passed, Jesus was found alone." The glory associated with Moses and Elijah was so eclipsed by the infinitely greater glory connected with Christ, that they faded from view.”

“Now it is something very much like this that we see here all through the Hebrews Epistle. The Holy Spirit takes up one object after another, holds each one up as it were in the presence of the all-excellent "Son," and as He does so, their glory is eclipsed, and the Lord Jesus is "found alone." The prophets, the angels, Moses, Joshua, the Levitical priesthood, the Old Testament men of faith, each come into view; each is compared with Christ, and each, in turn, fades away before His greater glory. Thus, the very things which Judaism most highly esteemed are shown to be far inferior to what God has now made known in the Christian revelation.”

The prophets of old did both foretell and forth tell the Word of God. Much of their foretelling was about the judgment that was coming if God’s people did not change their ways. Imagine you are at a playground with a group of mothers watching their kids play. You see a small child who has climbed up high and is about to jump down, but who does not realize there is another child right below who will be seriously hurt if they fall on him. You quickly turn to the mothers and say, “Look at what is about to happen.” You can see that the near future is going to produce a very negative scene if someone does not intervene. One mother screams at her child about to jump, and the other runs to scoop up the child below. The tragic future that was about to be has been avoided because of your prophetic message. Knowing the future is going to be bad can be extremely helpful when you respond to change the present so that the future will be different. That was the whole purpose of the prophets. They would tell Israel what was ahead if they did not obey God’s Word, and if they repented of their disobedience the future was bright rather than dark with judgment. All too often they did not listen and had to suffer the judgment that was prophesied.

Jesus was the greatest prophet of all because He not only predicted what would happen to Israel, but He predicted what would happen to all people if they did not receive God’s final and full revelation in Him. In Matt. 24 and 25 we have two of the greatest chapters of prophecy anywhere in the Bible. Jesus is the prophet and He tells the whole world for the rest of time what the future is going to be, right up to the time of the final judgment. All other prophecy has to be interpreted in the light of the words of the greatest of all prophets. The entire book of Revelation is the revelation that God gave Jesus to show to his servants what was to be. Jesus is the ultimate and supreme prophet, for it is by His revelation that we know what will be for the end of time and for all eternity. There is no competition for the title The Greatest Prophet, for there are none who can even qualify to foretell what Jesus foretells. You have to die, be raised and ascended to the right hand of God just to qualify. Everything we need to know about the

future we know through the words and teachings of Jesus. If we need to know it, He has shown it. He has given us an all-sufficient revelation of who God is, and the complete revelation of what shall be forever in the presence of God in heaven. In Mark 13:23 Jesus said to his disciples, "I have told you everything ahead of time."

Then to add to the greatness of this greatest of prophets we note that He is the only prophet who is also a great priest and king. Hebrews exalts Jesus as a unique high priest who ever lives to plead our case before God and offer His own blood as the atonement that merits our forgiveness. None of the prophets had such ability, and nowhere are they sought out to give forgiveness. Only Jesus has the right to be our intercessor before God. Then He is also the King of Kings. A king could be a prophet, as was the case with David, but he was not a priest. Nobody ever combined all three roles of prophet, priest and king like Jesus did. He is the superlative prophet because of the multiplicity of His offices, but more importantly because of the superiority of His message. All of the prophets spoke the message that God gave them, but none of those messages were as clear and profoundly significant for the future of God's people as the message that came from the greatest of prophets.

We may not think so, but the fact is, the task of the prophet is the most difficult of all the roles that Jesus played. The priest is the conservator of the past, but the prophet is one who breaks new ground. He looks to the future and all the possibilities that lay ahead depending on whether people obey or disobey the messages that God gives through them. They are disliked and hated because they do not conform to the status quo. Nothing stays put for the prophet, for the future is open to a host of new things. It will be filled with God's blessings or God's judgments. They give us pictures of the paradise that is possible, but also of the hell that is potential. Since people are almost always going along in sinful and indifferent ways that will lead to judgment, they do not like to hear warnings that disturb them. And so the job of the prophet is often one that is filled with rejection, and Jesus knew this to the highest degree. Jim Sanders, a Bible scholar, was talking about the profession of being a prophet, and its risks: "Do not set out to be a prophet unless you look good on wood." Jesus was crucified because of the message He brought from God. But He still speaks today and we need to recognize that if we do not listen to Him our houses will fall flat when the rains come. The only solid ground on which to build for eternity is obedience to the words of God's greatest Prophet.

By word and deed Jesus sums up the whole of what God wants to say to man. Jesus said: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5,17). "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and who rejects me rejects him who sent me." (Luke 10,16). Jesus is the Prophet that all must hear or forever pay the consequence of rejecting God's Word. There are numerous ways in which Jesus parallels the words and deeds of all the Old Testament prophets, but we have seen enough evidence to make it clear that Jesus was the greatest Prophet of all time.

II. CHAPTER TWO. THE GREATEST PARADOX

Jesus was a paradoxical person. How could He not be when He was both God and man? He was the most unique being that has ever been, and the result is we see Him exhibiting opposite characteristics at the same time. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as He went through the experience of Gethsemane and Calvary. It was literally hell he went through as He bore the sins of the world and endured the agony of separation from the Father. And yet at the same time we read in Heb. 12:2, "...who for the joy set before him endured the cross...." No one but the Son of God could experience both heaven and hell at the same time, for no one but the Son of God was also the Son of Man. Jesus was a person with two natures so that He could experience the greatest sorrow and the greatest joy simultaneously.

Because we have a problem in grasping the dual nature of Jesus we tend to focus on one aspect of Him and neglect its opposite. This is especially true when it comes to the matter of sorrow and joy. Historically the focus has been on the sorrow of Jesus because the cross is so central to Christian theology. Artists through the centuries have portrayed Jesus in a state of agony as He sweats drops of blood in Gethsemane, or when crowned with the ugly thorns that pierce His forehead, or when carrying the cross with His weak and bleeding body due to a severe whipping, or when He hangs God-forsaken upon the cruel cross. All of this is a true picture of the price Jesus paid for our redemption, but the truth of it has been so overwhelming that it has blinded our minds to the other side of the experience of the God-Man. This brings us to our text in Heb. 1:9 where we get an insight into the paradox of the Man of Sorrows being also the Man of Joy.

This text goes beyond saying that Jesus was a man of joy to saying that He was the most joyous person to ever live. He was the happiest man alive, even as a man of sorrows. Listen to this text: "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." It was by means of the oil of joy that Jesus was set above His companions. In other words, His joy was the greatest, and there is none who can compare with Him when it comes to joy. Jesus is only hours away from the cross, but we hear Him saying to His disciples in John 15:11, as He is teaching them to love Him and to love one another, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Jesus was heading to Gethsemane and Calvary, and all that led Him to be the man of sorrows, but it was with complete joy. He was the greatest of paradoxes. He was the happiest sad man in history. What He had he wanted to pass on to His disciples, and so He prays in John 17:13, "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them." You do not get any greater joy than the joy of Jesus.

This verse starts off with the paradox of Jesus being a person of great love and great hate. Again, we tend to focus on the love of Jesus and forget that He was also a great hater. We forget that if you really love righteousness you must hate its opposite, which is wickedness. Opposites have to coexist in all of us, for you cannot be truly loving if you do not hate what is unloving. Hate of evil is a part of love for the good. If you love peace, you will hate violence. If you love generosity, you will hate greediness. If you love loyalty, you will hate betrayal. If you love truth you will hate falsehood. You can go through every virtue and see that you cannot truly love any of them without a hate for their

opposites. Love cannot be complete without hate of what is not love, or what hinders and destroys love. The more we love Christ and what He loves, the more we will hate what He hates. It is a paradox but a fact that hate is a part of love. Not understanding this leads to a superficial understanding of the statement that God is love. Yes He is, and that is why He is a God of judgment on all that is not loving. Complete love hates evil and demands judgment on it.

Every positive virtue is paradoxical because it has to contain within it the hatred of what is opposed to it. Love without hate is incomplete, and that makes love a paradox. Jesus was the greatest paradox because He was perfect love, and that means He had to have a perfect hatred for what was the enemy of love. The joy of Jesus was also paradoxical in that joy cannot be complete without sorrow. If you are joyful over what is good, then you have to be sad over that which is not good, or over sin. Sin made Jesus the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but joy over the sacrifice that made salvation from sin possible for mankind made Jesus the greatest person of joy to ever live. We are all paradoxical in combining opposites in our nature, but Jesus combined them to the highest degree, and so He is the greatest paradox. In this message we want to focus on the paradox that the man of sorrows was the most joyful man who ever lived.

Jesus is more joyful than the angels, for they do rejoice over every sinner who repents, but Jesus has a greater joy, for He is the one who made their repentance possible by His sacrifice for them. The angels sing for joy over the marvels of God's creation, but Jesus is filled with joy because He was the agent of creation and the agent of salvation. He is the King of joy and gladness, for all that is beautiful, glorious, and wondrous in both the physical and spiritual universe is the work of His hands. God anointed Him with the oil of joy above His companions. Christ means the anointed one, and so He is the Christ of Joy, or Jesus of Joy. He is the greatest of joyous persons. There is no greater joy than the joy of Jesus. No matter how joyful the angels are over sinners who repent they cannot match the joy of Jesus. Jesus is always happier over what is righteous and good than any other can ever be. The Hebrew word for joy in Ps. 45:7, which is quoted here, can be translated gladness, rejoicing and mirth. The Greek word used here for joy means leaping with gladness. It is an overflowing joy that can be called hilarity.

Jesus is anointed with the oil of hilarious joy. The angels are joyous creatures, but they cannot match Jesus, for He is set above these companions. Some commentators feel the companions are Christians, and this does fit too, but since the whole context is about Jesus being superior to angels, it is best to see them as the companions referred to here. It does fit his human companions, however, for when the 72 that Jesus sent out to go to every town to prepare the way for Him came back with joy it says in Luke 10:21, "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'" The disciples were joyful, but Jesus was absolutely filled with joy, for he saw what none other could see. Jesus says in 10:18, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Jesus had the greatest joy because He knew more of what God was doing in history, and how the kingdom of God was coming in greater power. The greater our

knowledge of what God is doing the greater our joy in being a part of it, and Jesus was fully aware of what God was doing.

In the light of this truth we need to get a more complete picture of the human life of our Lord. He was a man of sorrows in the final week of His life because of the horrible treatment He had to suffer at the hands of sinful people, but this one week of His life should not be the way we see Jesus for all of His life. The facts will not support that He was anything less than a very happy person. If he was filled with joy even as He faced the cross, how much more when He was going about preaching the truth that changed lives before His very eyes every day. And how could he be anything but filled with joy as He watches the happy faces of families as they saw their loved ones being healed from hopeless situation. Tell me, if you dare, that Jesus did not rejoice with those who rejoiced, as well as weep with those who wept. Most all of His ministry Jesus lived in the midst of people who were praising God for His loving and compassionate heart that met their needs as no other could. Jesus was not merely happy, He was the happiest of all men, for He loved righteousness and hated wickedness, and He was seeing righteousness win over evil power every day.

God's greatest pleasure is in doing good. He loves people and He loves to do what is good for people in time and eternity. God is good oriented by His very nature, which is good. In Jer. 32:41 God says about His people, "I will rejoice in doing them good...." In Zeph. 3:17 we read, "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." God is a happy God who loves to sing and rejoice over his people. Jesus, as God in the flesh, had the same nature, and there is no way He could feed the hungry, heal the sick, and raise the dead and not feel great joy in doing so. Only once do we read of Jesus and His disciples singing a hymn just before they left the upper room to go to Gethsemane, but there is no doubt that after many a day of ministering to happy delighted people they had served, they sat around the camp fire at night and sang songs of joy. Jesus had to be the happiest man on earth during those years of ministry.

Peter Marshall in his famous "Christianity Can Be Fun" sermon said something we need to hear: "God is a God of laughter as well as of prayer....a God of singing, as well as of tears. God is at home in the play of His children. He loves to hear us laugh. We do not honor God by our long faces...our austerity." We serve a God of joy and a Savior who is the most joyful being in the universe, and He wants us to have His joy in us completely. How in the world has anyone gotten the idea that there is anything sacred or holy in being solemn? There is a place for solemnity, for even the happiest man alive wept at the tomb of Lazarus, but this is the exception, and not the pattern of daily life. Eccles. 3:4 says, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh." It is mighty poor theology to think that more time should be spent weeping than laughing. Jesus spent most of His days in rejoicing with a complete joy, as He was filled with the Spirit, who is the author and giver of joy. The joy of Jesus was not based on circumstances, but was a part of His very being, as it was of God's being, and the Spirit's being.

Erma Bombeck once wrote about her experience of being in church when a small boy turned around in the pew and smiled at the people behind him. The mother slapped the child and said, "Stop that grinning! You're in church!" Erma said, "I wanted to grab this child and tell him about my God; The happy God. The smiling God." It is unfortunate that so many people have a misconception about God and Jesus when it comes to their joyfulness. The point of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is the greatest and best of everything. If angels are great, Jesus is greater. If Moses is great, Jesus is greater. If Aaron is great, Jesus is greater. The point of this verse is, if anyone is happy and joyous, Jesus is more joyous and the greatest that can be when it comes to being happy with eternal joy. There is no being in the universe more joyful than Jesus.

When you look at what Jesus saw as God's plan for His life you can see why He would be so happy. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus in reading in the synagogue from Isa. 61:1-3, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is one me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion-to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor."

Jesus said this was being fulfilled by Him that very moment. Jesus came to reverse the effects of the fall and restore man to fellowship with God and to a life filled with the blessings of God. One of His goals was to pass on His own anointing with the oil of joy. He wanted His people to be people who are anointed with the oil of gladness where mourning and despair are out of place except on rare situations. For some strange reason some Christians want to remain prisoners of darkness and negativity, and resist the joy of the Lord, which is their strength. The more I focused on the joy of Jesus the more I was compelled to try and convey His joy in going to the cross in poetry. The whole purpose of the plan of salvation to bring many to glory with Jesus was being fulfilled by His act of sacrifice. It was the saddest and the gladdest event ever, and I have tried to say it in this poem:

Joyful is the Lord of glory-
Son of God and Son of Man.
There's no more glorious story
Since the creation began.

He was full of joy and laughter,
As He walked this earthly road.
There will never be one after
Who could with joy bear His load.

For the joy that was before Him
He went to the cross to die.
He would never let that joy dim

In spite of His fearful cry:

**“Why, my God, have you forsaken
Me in this most awful time?
Cruelly my life they’ve taken.
It’s mankind’s most gruesome crime.**

**Father, they know not what they do,
So I pray you forgive all.
I soon now will be home with you,
As I break through death’s dark wall.**

**It’s the thought of this victory
Over Satan and all foes
That makes me finish this story
In spite of trials and woes.**

**My joy never could be complete
If I returned home alone.
I want billions of sinner’s feet
Marching past me on my throne.**

**For this joy I came down to earth
To give my life for mankind.
It’s my goal to give a new birth
To all who saving faith find.**

**My sacrifice could save all men
If they would just call on me.
My greatest joy of all is then,
Billions in eternity.**

**For this joy I lay my life down.
For this joy I intercede.
For this joy I gave up my crown,
So that my plan could succeed.**

**There’s no greater sorrow than mine
That men in such bondage be.
There’s no greater joy that is mine-
My shed blood will set them free.”**

And so we see how it is that Jesus could be a man of sorrows and a man of joy at the same time. It was the saddest time in history when men could be so blind to love that they crucified the Lord of love. It was also the gladdest time in history because that Lord of love was willing to give His life so that even the worst of men could become children of

God by faith in Him. Jesus saw this end result of the cross and that is why He could face the cross with a joy that made Him the most joyous person in the universe.

III. CHAPTER THREE. THE GREATEST WORSHIP

No other being in all of history has been held up as one to be worshiped by all the angels. God Himself gave the command that all of His intelligent created beings are to bow down to His Son. He forbids that anyone worship any angel, but He demands that His Son be worshiped. This should settle it once and for all that Jesus is God, for no one but God is to be worshiped. He is not an angel, not even the highest of the angels, though He did play the role of the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, but the One that all angels are to worship. Jesus is the greatest object of worship in the universe, for in worshiping Him we are worshiping the God of the universe along with all the superior beings in the universe. Those who thought that worshiping angels would be the highest form of worship are clearly told here that this is folly, for all the angels worship the Son of God. He is the One we are to worship. If you want to be a follower of angels, then do what they do, and exalt Jesus as the ultimate object of worship. If angels are to worship Jesus, how much more are we to do so?

The angels were for the Jews the highest beings they could conceive of, and William Kelly has this comment on that: "If any beings had special account or stood highly exalted in a Jew's eye, the holy angels were they; and no wonder. It was in this form that Jehovah ordinarily appeared, whenever He visited the fathers or the sons of Israel. There were exceptions; but, as a rule, He who made known the will and manifested the power of Jehovah in these early days to the fathers is spoken of habitually as the angel of Jehovah. It is thus He was represented. He had not yet taken manhood, or made it part of His person. I do not deny that there was sometimes the appearance of man. An angel might appear in whatever guise it pleased God; but, appear as He might, He was the representative of Jehovah. Accordingly, the Jews always associated angels with the highest idea of beings, next to Jehovah Himself, the chosen messengers of the divine will for any passing vision among men. But now appeared One who completely surpassed the angels. Who was He? The Son of God. It ought to have filled them with joy."

One of the things we have in common with all intelligent beings that God has created is the object of our worship. With the angels we bow before the Son of God and acknowledge Him as our God. The Father and Son are one, and so to worship the Son is to worship the Father. If Jesus was not God then it would be idolatry to bow to Him and worship Him. But God demands that all bow and worship the Son, and so God is clearly revealing that the Son is equal to Him and worthy of worship. John Bunyan was right when he said, "If Jesus Christ be not God, then heaven will be filled with idolaters."

It is the worship of Jesus as the Son of God that makes Christianity unique from all the religions of the world. All religions may pay tribute to Jesus as a great person in many ways, but only Christians will worship Jesus as Lord. The easiest way to determine if any group is truly Christian, or not, is to ask if they worship Jesus as God. If they do no, then they are not a Christian group, even if they have many biblical truths and values. No one is truly biblical and obedient to God who does not worship the Son as equal with the Father.

When the angels praised God at the birth of Jesus they were not idolaters but obedient servants of God, for they were commanded to worship the Son and they did so verbally the very instant that He became a person in history. The Incarnation was a time of angelic worship, for God was doing something never before done in the universe. His Son was becoming a man, and as the God-Man He was a valid object of worship, for even as a man He was still God. It was not idolatry to worship this man, for He was God in human flesh. He was still the God who created all the angels, and they were to convey their loyalty to Him as their God by their worship. It is of interest to note that even the fallen angels felt obligated to worship Jesus. They may have hated it but they could not escape their duty that was a part of their nature, and so we read in Mark 3:11, "Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God.'" They could not help themselves, for they knew He was their God, even though they were in rebellion against Him. All supernatural beings have to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, and wise men all through history join them. I say it in poetry:

**All those of the heavenly host
Watched the Son on this earth trod,
And each of them does gladly boast,
We worship Him, the Son of God.**

**Even the demons, who in hell roast,
Knowing they'll feel His judgment rod,
Must admit from their dark post,
He truly is, the Son of God.**

**Men join in from coast to coast,
As through their daily toil they plod,
And they praise Him they love the most.
He truly is, the Son of God.**

Pfitzner points out that worship is a theme at the beginning and the end in Hebrews. It begins here in the first chapter with all the angels commanded to worship the Son, and in 12:22 we read, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly." In the end all the redeemed will join the angels in worshipping the Son. We see this final experience of worship in

Rev. 5:11-14. "11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is

the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped." Every creature God has created will one day join the angels in worship of the Son.

We are to worship with the angels, but we are not to worship the angels. This was a strong temptation for early Christians who came out of both Judaism and Paganism. The temptation even came to one as strong in the Christian faith as the Apostle John, but the lesson he learned is recorded for all to learn that angels are never to be worshiped. Listen to his experience: "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. 9 But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" (Revelation 22:8-9 NIV)

The amazing thing is that John had already been warned not to worship an angel earlier. In Rev. 19 he is overwhelmed by what he saw and heard and we read in verse 10, "At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'" The very fact that John, who was the most mature of Apostles, was tempted twice to worship an angel points out how easily it is for men to be amazed by the supernatural and wondrous, and so be tempted to worship someone other than Jesus. This is idolatrous worship, and dangerous worship, and forbidden worship. The world is filled with all kinds of worship of beings and creatures that are not valid forms of worship, and that is why the focus of Hebrews is on the worship of Jesus alone as the only valid worship, and, thereby, the greatest worship.

Anyone who seeks for our worship must be God Himself, or it is idolatry. Ray Stedman wrote, "There is no angel who has ever existed who has ever been worthy of one moment's worship. No angel would ever ask us to worship him, no angel would ever accept our worship, no angel would ever desire our worship. The angels of God desire one thing and one thing only, and that is to do God's will! They just want to worship the Lord, to do His will, and to bring glory and honor to His holy name." Since, as we saw in the Rev. 5 passage above, all created beings will worship Jesus, it follows that no created being is to be worshiped themselves. This includes angels and all other beings, including men. But Jesus received worship without any objection, and He thereby made it clear that He was acknowledging Himself as God. Copeland has compiled a list of the places where Jesus received worship.

Jesus received worship!

- a. From the wise men - Mt 2:11
- b. From the leper - Mt 8:2
- c. From the ruler - Mt 9:18
- d. From His disciples in the boat - Mt 14:33
- e. From the Canaanite woman - Mt 15:25

- f. From the man born blind - Jn 9:38**
- g. From the women and other disciples following His resurrection - Mt 28:9,17**
- h. From disciples after His ascension - Lk 24:52**

We live in a day where people are not too different from those to whom the book of Hebrews was written. Angel superstition is very popular. People pray to angels and have angel pins that they wear for good luck charms. There are numerous books on angels that are valid Bible studies on their ministries, but also many books that deal with them as if they were gods worthy of worship. This is clearly idolatry, for the whole point of Hebrews is that absolutely no one, and no being in the universe, is worthy of worship but Jesus. The angels were to worship only God in the Old Testament, and now in the New Testament they are to worship Jesus, because He is their God.

HE ALONE IS WORTHY OF WORSHIP

**Because He is a Son and not a servant.
Because He is born of God and not created.
Because His kingdom is everlasting and not temporal.**

We have looked at His being the Son of God in a previous message. This made Jesus superior to the angels. In this verse we see the stress on Jesus being the firstborn as a basis for the angels to worship Him. Jesus is not a created being like the angels, but is one born of God. He is part of the very being of God. The angels know this and know that He alone is worthy of their worship. Angels are not fools. They know God has never said to them that they are worthy of worship. They know God has never said to them that they are to sit at His right hand. They gladly sing along with the saints the words of Tillit S. Teddlie:

**Worthy of praise is Christ our Redeemer, Worthy
of glory, honor and pow'r! Worthy of all our souls
adoration, Worthy art Thou! Worthy art Thou!
Lift up the voice in praise and devotion, Saints of
all earth before Him should bow; Angels in heaven
worship Him saying, Worthy art Thou! Worthy art
Thou!
Lord, may we come before Thee with singing, Filled
with thy spirit, wisdom and pow'r; May we ascribe
Thee glory and honor, Worthy art Thou! Worthy
art Thou!
Chorus: Worthy of riches, blessings and honor,
Worthy of wisdom, glory and pow'r! Worthy of
earth and heaven's thanksgiving Worthy art Thou!
Worthy art Thou!**

In Deuteronomy 6:13 we read, "For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" The angels are not stupid. They know that it is forbidden for any worship to be directed toward any other being but God, and yet here they are commanded by God to worship the Son. God is declaring that the Son is God, for if He is not, then God is violating His own law by demanding worship of one who is not God. The angels recognize Jesus as their sovereign Lord. He reigns over all creation from the very throne of the Father. They are His servants doing His will in the world, but He is the everlasting King. Angels always serve, but they never reign, for that is not their role in God's plan, but it is His role for the Son. From their point of view nothing is more absurd than to be worshiping them, for it is the Son alone who is worthy of worship. He is the King of kings, clothed in majesty, and seated on the throne with all the glory of the Father. How they must grieve at the folly of men who exalt them above their sovereign King.

The angels are servants who change constantly to fulfill the purpose of God. They are, as we see in verse 7, like the winds and flames of fire. They vary with the moment and the tasks they are assigned to do, but Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the Rock, and as verse 12 says, He remains the same and unchanging forever. Angels are the servants, but He is the everlasting King of an eternal kingdom. Angels change and creation changes, and everything is always changing, but Jesus never does. He is the solid rock foundation of all reality. He is worthy of worship because He alone is a foundation on which we can build for eternity.

Scott Grant has written what we all know to be true: "Nothing else and no one else is like Jesus. Everything and everyone else changes. People change; moods change; jobs change. Times change; fashions change; computers change. Leaders change; bosses change; interests change. In our age, technology has changed everything. And technology is changing so fast that we can't keep track of the changes. Products of new technology are obsolete by the time they're out the door. Such rapid-fire change frays the edges of our psyches, for we don't know where the next change is coming from, or even if we will notice it at all." In such a world as this we need some basis for stability, and we find it in Jesus. Wind and fire are wonderful servants, like the angels, but we do not worship the wind and the flames, for they have no stability, and are part of the ever-changing environment in which we live.

There is no question about Jesus being superior to the angels, and that He alone is worthy of their worship, but there is some question about just when it is referred to that they are commanded to worship the Son. It says when God brings His firstborn into the world. This is ambiguous, for the Son was brought into the world in His incarnation, but He is also brought into the world in His Second Coming. Some prefer one or the other of these two times. It really does not matter, for Jesus is always the Son worthy of worship by the angels. There has never been a time when this was not the case, and there will never be a future time when they will not worship their Creator and King, the Lord Jesus. But for sake of argument we want to look at the reasoning behind the convictions of Bible interpreters.

First we look at those who see this command to worship the Son as being at the time of the incarnation. Calvin is of this persuasion, and he wrote, "The subject is Christ manifested in the flesh, and the Apostle expressly says, that the Spirit thus spoke when Christ was

introduced into the world; but this would not have been said consistently with truth except the manifestation of Christ be really spoken of in the Psalm. And so the case indeed is; for the Psalm commences with an exhortation to rejoice; nor did David address the Jews, but the whole earth, including the islands, that is, countries beyond the sea. The reason for this joy is given, because the Lord would reign. Further, if you read the whole Psalm, you will find nothing else but the kingdom of Christ, which began when the Gospel was published; nor is the whole Psalm anything else but a solemn decree, as it were, by which Christ was sent to take possession of His kingdom. Besides, what joy could arise from His kingdom, except it brought salvation to the whole world, to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews? Aptly then does the Apostle say here, that he was introduced into the world, because in that Psalm what is described is his coming to men."

Another author that I do not remember has this excellent defense of the incarnation being the time referred to: "Make no mistake about this, the angels will surely be worshipping Him when He comes again--but that is not the point of our text. It is when He was "brought into the world" the first time that particularly accentuates His superiority. This is Jesus in a humbled state, having divested Himself of all of the prerogatives of Deity. When, at birth, He was "brought into the world," He could neither bless or curse, pray or preach, guide or feed. He had to be cared for, nourished, and protected. He had to be rescued from Herod, and raised to "increase in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:40,52). It was then, in that humbled condition, that the cry went out in heaven, "Let all the angels of God worship Him!" Who can forget the arresting words of Scripture: "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:12-14).

"Such things never occurred at the birth of anyone else. As great as were Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, the heavenly hosts did not praise God at their birth! The praises of angels were not even heard at the birth of John the Baptist! But when God brought His only begotten Son into the world, the angelic order was called into activity. An angel announced His birth (Luke 1:26-29), revealed the name of the Holy Child (Lk 1:31), allayed the concerns of Joseph (Matt 1:20), and directed him in the care of the Child (Matt 2:13,19). Angels ministered to Jesus in His temptation (Matt 4:11), and one these holy ones strengthened Him in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43)."

William Kelly adds to this view by writing, " It is not predicated of the Son as eternally such; there would be no wonder in this. None could be surprised, assuredly, that the Son of God, viewed in His own eternal being, should be greater than an angel. But that He, an infant on earth, looked at as the son of the Virgin, that He should be above all the angels in heaven - this was a wonder to the Jewish mind; and yet what had in their scriptures a plainer proof? It was not to an angel in heaven, but to the Babe at Bethlehem, that God had said, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee;" and, again, "I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son" - words said historically of David's son; but, as usual, looking onward to a greater than David, or his wise son, who immediately succeeded him. Christ is the true and continual object of the inspiring Spirit."

The above arguments sound very convincing to me, but there are powerful voices who disagree and see this command as reference to the coming of Jesus into the world at His Second Coming. Arthur Pink sums up this conviction with these words: "And again when He bringeth in the First-begotten into the world," etc. Commentators are divided as to the meaning and placing of the word "again," many contending it should be rendered, "When He shall bring in again into the habitable earth the Firstborn." There is not a little to be said in favor of this view. First, the Greek warrants it. In the second part of verse 5 the translators have observed the order of the original-"and again, I will be unto Him," etc. But here in verse 6 they have departed from it-"And again, when He bringeth in" instead of "when He shall bring in again." Secondly, we know of nothing in Scripture which intimates that the angels worshiped the infant Savior. Luke 2:13, 14 refers to them adoring God in heaven, and not His incarnate Son on earth. But Revelation 5:11-14 shows us all heaven worshiping the Lamb on the eve of His return to the earth, when He comes with power and glory. Scriptures which mention the angels in connection with Christ's second advent are Matthew 13:41; 16:27; 24:31; 25:31; 2 Thessalonians 1:7.

That verse 6 has reference to the second advent of Christ receives further confirmation in the expression "when He bringeth in the First-begotten into the world." This language clearly looks back to Jehovah putting Israel into possession of the land of Canaan, their promised inheritance. "Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance" (Ex. 15:17). "To drive out the nations from before thee, greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance" (Deut. 4:38). In like manner, when Christ returns to the earth, the Father will say to Him, "Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession" (Ps. 2:8).

In addition to what has just been said on "when He bringeth in the firstborn" into the world we would call attention to what we doubt not, is a latent contrast here. It is set over against His expulsion from the world, at His first advent. Men, as it were, drove Him ignominiously from the world. But He will re-enter it in majesty, in the manifested power of God. He will be "brought into it" in solemn pomp, and the same world which before witnessed His reproach, shall then behold His Divine dominion. Then shall He come, "in the glory of His Father" (Matt. 16:27), and then shall the angels render gladsome homage to that One whose honor is the Father's chief delight. Then shall the word go forth from the Father's lips, "Let all the angels of God worship Him."

"Our minds naturally turn back to the first advent and what is recorded in Luke 2. But there the angels praised the Sender, not the Sent: God in the highest was the object of their worship though the moving cause of it was the lowly Babe. But when Christ comes back to earth it is the Firstborn Himself who shall be worshiped by them. It was to this He referred when He said, "When He shall come in His own glory, and in His Father's and of the holy angels." The "glory of the angels," i.e. the glory they will bring to Him, namely, their worship of Him. Then shall be seen "the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:51). May we who have been sought out and saved by Him "worship" Him now in the time of His rejection."

My own conviction, after reading all of the above arguments, is that there is no way to exclude either of the times. Jesus was always the eternal Son superior to the angels, and so

He was worshiped by the angels in His pre-incarnate state, His incarnate state, and will be worshiped in the fullness of His glory when He comes again. There is no point in limiting the worship of Jesus by the angels to any particular time, for there has never been a time when this was not appropriate and expected, and there never will be such a time. When it comes to the worship of Jesus the name of the game is inclusion and not exclusion. You do not seek for a time when it is excluded, for it does not exist, and that is why worshiping Jesus is the greatest worship. If there was a time when Jesus was not worshiped, then He would not be equal with the Father, and so it is not wise to try and find a time when these words of command to worship Him do not apply. Consider this, He was also "brought into the world" at His resurrection, returning from the region of the dead (Ps. 26:10; Acts 2:27; Rom 10:7). This was also a time to worship Him as victor over the greatest enemy of man. Worshiping Jesus is the greatest worship because it is never ending worship, and everlastingly appropriate, for He is always worthy of worship.

The obvious conclusion is, if the angels are to worship the Son as Lord, how much more are we to worship Him as our Lord? He is the King over all creation, and He is our King now and forever. We are to join the angels in perpetual worship of our sovereign King. We are to honor Him just as we honor the Father. John 5:21-23 says, "'For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5:21-23 NKJV).

Don Styles in an editorial makes these comments on the above text: "Honor" is a component of worship, but in this context we can go further and recognize it actually means to "worship." Consider the following:

1. "Honor" is used as a synonym for "worship" in Matt. 15:8-9: "...And honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me..." Their worship was only with their lips, by which they "honored" or "worshiped" God.
2. Throughout his ministry Jesus was "worshiped" by many -- Mt. 8:2 a leper; 9:18 a ruler; 14:33 the twelve; 15:25 a gentile woman, etc. - and Jesus never corrected these people from doing so.
3. The authority to raise the dead and to pass judgment belonged to Jesus during his ministry -- to Martha, Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) and proved it by raising Lazarus from the dead; in other words, the Son had authority even then to give life. To the thief on the cross Jesus pronounced, "You will be with me in paradise," pronouncing at that moment the eternal judgment of the penitent thief."

Jesus was worshiped in His manhood, and Jesus is worshiped in His deity, and forever both angelic and human beings will worship the God-Man on His throne. Can there be any doubt that worshiping Jesus is THE GREATEST WORSHIP.

IV. CHAPTER FOUR. THE GREATEST MAN

Ivan Maddox has pointed out that there have only been three perfect people in this world, and they were Adam, Eve, and Jesus Christ, who is called the second Adam. So two Adam's and an Eve make up the total population of that mini list of people who were perfect. That list is quickly reduced to one when we make the list consist of those who stayed perfect by never sinning. Jesus, by the process of elimination, becomes the only person to survive on the list of people who have been perfect and who have stayed perfect all of their lives.

Each of the three who started perfect did so because they were direct creations of God, and did not come by means of human reproduction only, as did all other humans who have ever lived. Adam was a direct creation, and Eve was made from his body by supernatural creation. Jesus came from a mother, as have all others, but He had no natural father, but was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and so was created by a combination of the supernatural and natural. The fact that Jesus was the only man to ever live that never fell out of fellowship with God because of sin in His life is basis enough to call Him the greatest man who ever lived. But there is far more that makes Him worthy of that title.

Charles Jefferson in his book *The Character of Jesus* gives a list of great people in history who were all very different from each other. He then writes, "What characteristic is common to all? In such a heterogeneous company is it possible to find any mark which makes them akin? It is possible, and the quality which is common to all is an extraordinary capacity for achievement. These men all did things, enduring things, so that the world was not the same after they had gotten done with it. They carved statues or painted pictures or led armies or ruled states or composed music or framed laws or wrote poems or made discoveries or inventions which enriched the lives and homes of men. They achieved something worth while. They made a mark on the mind of the world. The product of their genius is an imperishable possession of our race."

In the light of that paragraph we must ask, "What did Jesus leave or achieve?" We have no great books from His pen. We have no art or sculpture, or any physical creation or invention from Him. He never led an army to any victory, nor did He ever lead a government. His greatness is not like the greatness of any other man, but it is greater than that of any other man. Charles Lamb said, "If Shakespeare was to come into this room, we should all rise up to meet him; but if Christ was to come into it, we should all fall upon our knees." We honor the greatness of others, but we worship the greatness of Jesus, for His is the greatest of greatness.

We cannot minimize the awesome impact of the teachings of Jesus on all of history. His Sermon of the Mount has been praised by most all the religious leaders of the world, but it is not as a teacher that Jesus is the greatest of men, for there have been many great teachers. Jesus was great in a different way than other great people have been great. He was great at being a man. He was the greatest human being that ever lived. He was not great just because of what He did, but because of what He was. Others became great because of the things they were able to create, or deeds they were able to accomplish, but Jesus became great because He was the only man in history who was everything that an ideal man could be. He was the ultimate man, for He was what God intended man to be, and what man will be when history ends and eternity begins with all of the redeemed being like Jesus.

Jefferson points out that all other great men in history were great at what they could do or produce, but they were not great as people. Their manhood was defective. Alexander the Great was great as a general, but as a man he was pathetic. He was a man of anger and drunkenness, and in a fit even killed his own friend. Other great generals, like Napoleon, were also, in spite of their gifts of leadership, pygmies as men. They were immoral in many ways and were not examples to follow for the good life. Even the great men of the Bible were far from ideal. God used them and blest them out of His grace and not because they were worthy. Noah got drunk and cursed his own grandson, Abraham gave his wife to Pharaoh, Moses was a murderer, and David was a murderer and an adulterer, Solomon married idolaters and became one himself, and all of the Apostles Jesus chose were men of pride and prejudice. Jefferson writes again, “It is one of the saddest of all surprises to discover on reading the biographies of the world's immortal workers how many of them have been narrow and superstitious, selfish and envious, sordid in their ambitions and groveling in their aims, achieving one significant or beautiful piece of work in the glory of which the shabbiness of their character has been swallowed up.” Study the lives of all great men and you will have to conclude that no great men are the greatest of men, and that is why Jesus stands out as the most unique of all great men. He was the greatest because He was the ideal man.

Great men are themselves a testimony to the greatness of Jesus. It would be hard to find any famous person who has ever made a comment about Jesus who did not admit His uniqueness and greatness. Let me share just a few quotes from great minds. Someone has put together a much larger list, and I am just lifting out some of them.

Philip Schaff, Swiss-born U.S. biblical scholar, 1858

“This Jesus of Nazareth without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed and Napoleon; without science and learning he shed more light on matters human and Divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, he

spoke much words of life as were never spoken before or since the produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions...than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”

Michael Faraday, one of the greatest experimental philosophers; Doctorate from Oxford University, holding 97 unsought for distinctions who discovered Electricity

“I bow before him who is Lord of all.”

Mark Hopkins, American educator and theologian, president of Williams College (1836-1872), 1802-1887

“No revolution that has taken place in society can be compared to that which has been produced by the words of Jesus Christ.”

Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French (1804-1814). A brilliant military strategist, 1769-1821

“Between him and whoever else in the world, there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by himself. His ideas and his sentiments, the truth which he announces, his manner of convincing, are not explained by human organization. The nearer I approach, the more carefully I examine, everything is above me - everything remains grand, of a grandeur which overpowers.”

Ernest Renan, French historian, religious scholar and linguist

“All history is incomprehensible without Christ.”

“Whatever may be the surprises of the future, Jesus will never be surpassed.”

H. G. Wells, British writer, 1866-1946

When asked which person left the most permanent impression on history, he replied that judging a person's greatness by historical standards:

“By this test, Jesus stands first.”

“I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”

“Christ is the most unique person of history. No man can write a history of the human race without giving first and foremost place to the penniless teacher of Nazareth.”

Kenneth Scott Latourette, former President of American Historic Society

In A History of Christianity:

“It is evidence of His importance, of the effect that He has had upon history and presumably, of the baffling mystery of His being that no other life ever lived on this planet has evoked so huge a volume of literature among so many people and languages, and that, far from ebbing, the flood continues to mount.”

“As the centuries pass by, the evidence is accumulating that measured by its effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet. The influence appears to be mounting.”

“No other life lived on this planet has so widely and deeply affected mankind.”

Sholem Asch, Polish-born American Yiddish writer, 1880-1957

“Jesus Christ is the outstanding personality of all time. No other teacher - Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Mohammedan - is still a teacher whose teaching is such a guidepost for the world we live in. Other teachers may have something basic for an Oriental, an Arab, or the Occidental; but every act and word of Jesus has value for all of us.”

There is no need to go on, for it is a fact, not even the enemies of Christianity have bad things to say of Jesus. He is even recognized by famous atheists to have been truly great. There is no debate here, but there is debate as to the reality of the manhood of Jesus. One of the first heresies in the early church was called Docetism, which got its name from the Greek word dokeo meaning “to seem.” They taught that Jesus did not become a real man in the flesh, but just took on the form of a man. He seemed real, but he was not an authentic man. He was a pretend man. This was a rejection of the Incarnation and the Word becoming flesh, and it was rejected by the early church as heresy. We want to look at how strongly the book of Hebrews stresses the reality of the humanity of Christ. If He was not a real man, then He does not count as the greatest man, or even a great man, for if He was just God pretending to be a man, then the competition is not fair at all. His perfect manhood would be all fake, for it would be no problem for God to pretend to be a man. His humanity had to be real to fulfill the plan of God, and we will see why, but first consider the evidence for-

I. THE REALITY OF HIS HUMANITY

Verse 11 says Jesus is of the same family with the children of God. Verse 14 says that He shared the same flesh and blood. Verses 10 and 18 say that He suffered, and verse 18 says that He was tempted. Jesus called men His brothers, and He was just like them, even to the point of being able to die. He was a real man in every way that a man can be a man. He was without sin, but He lived in a body and a world that was under the influence of sin everywhere, and so He suffered the limitations and weaknesses of the flesh. He got hungry and tired, and He got frustrated with people, especially His disciples. He wept in times of sorrow, and He rejoiced in times of celebration. He lived a completely authentic human life. The following list of Scriptures has been compiled by Diane S. Dew that make it clear that Jesus was not a fake, but a real man.

Physically, He was the same as we are.

A. He was born of our flesh, of a woman.

Genesis 3:15
Isaiah 7:14 (Matthew 1:23)
Matthew 1:16, 21, 25
Luke 1:31, 32; 2:7
John 1:14
Acts 2:30
Romans 1:3; 8:3
Galatians 4:4
Hebrews 2:14-18

B. He grew physically.

Isaiah 53:2
Luke 2:40, 52

C. He had a body of flesh and bones.

Luke 24:39
1 Timothy 3:16
Hebrews 2:14

D. His veins contained blood.

John 19:34

E. He hungered.

Matthew 4:2 (Luke 4:2)
Matthew 21:18
Mark 11:12

F. He thirsted.

Psalms 69:21

John 19:28

G. He became weary and slept.

Matthew 8:24 (Mark 4:38)

John 4:6

H. He died.

Matthew 27:50 (Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30)

1 Peter 3:18

Hebrews 2:9, 14

We can see that He also had all the same emotions as we do. When He saw injustice he became angry as in Matt. 21:12,13, 23 where He cleansed the temple of the racketeering. He had great mental anguish as in Luke 22:44. He could be filled with great joy as in Luke 10:21. Jesus had to struggle in prayer just as we do, and he had to fight off temptation. It is hard to find any emotion that Jesus did not share with us. The record is clear that His life was not just an act, but it was a real life of a man.

II. THE REASON FOR HIS HUMANITY

First of all, you need to be a man to understand a man. You cannot understand any animal completely because you do not know how they feel or think, if they do, about anything completely. You can see the dog wag its tail and understand they feel happy and glad to see you, but when you scold them and they walk away with their tail between their legs, how bad do they feel hurt, and what are they thinking? You can't know, and you cannot understand how they feel about most of life's experiences because you are not like them. They cannot understand you either, because they do not have the body and mind of a man.

To fully identify with a person you have to have similar experiences. If you have never lost a mate by divorce or death, you can understand the pain of what it must be, but you do not really know what it is like. If you have never had a serious disease you cannot fully grasp what it is like for those who do. If you have never been tempted to a particular sin, it does not make a lot of sense to you, for it is so easy to not do those things that have no appeal. Only those with the same attraction to a particular sin can understand it in others. We could go on and on with thousands of experiences and show that you have to be one with someone to really identify with them. That is why Jesus had to become a man and go all the way into the life of a real human. If we were to have a high priest who could understand us and intercede for us, we needed one who had been where we are, and so knows what the battle really is. The suffering of Jesus was not just the cross, but the being tempted in every way like we are, but without sin. Not to ever give in to temptation is a pain we can never know, for all men do give in at some point, but

Jesus never did. To never fail, and to never give in to some temptation out of God's will is to live a hard life. We tend to think it was a snap to be perfect, but the fact is, it was the hardest life that could be lived. Jesus lived the greatest life ever lived, but it was also the hardest ever lived. Try and be perfect for a week, and you will begin to grasp how impossible it would be to be perfect for 33 years.

Verse 10 tells us that it was through His suffering that He became perfect. You do not become perfect by avoiding all temptation to do evil. The person who grows up in isolation and who never has a chance to do anything evil is not the perfect or ideal person. It is the one who faces the worst that life can throw at them, and yet stands fast in not yielding to the forces that push and pull toward evil. That is the life Jesus lived. Heb. 4:15 says He was tempted in every way just as we are, but He demonstrated that a man can face all temptation and still be faithful to God. Paul wrote in I Cor. 10:13, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Men all too seldom call on God in the time of great temptation. It is easier to just give in, for it is painful to resist. Jesus took full advantage of this promise of God's help, and He was able to overcome all temptation. But the point is, it was suffering that He had to endure, and because He knows the power of temptation and how difficult it is to resist, He is a more sympathetic High Priest on our behalf. An alcoholic does not want a teetotaler defending him, and a sinner does not want a judge who has never struggled with sin. Jesus became a man in all the fulness of manhood so that He can be the best possible helper that a man can have. He did not live the perfect life just so He could look down on the rest of mankind as pathetic wimps. It is true that He is the perfect example that we are to try to imitate, but the fact is we cannot, and so we need more than a good example. We need one who could be perfect, but who also knows how difficult it is, and how great a torture it is to live in the flesh and not submit to the sins of the flesh. We need a perfect example who is able to love those who are not perfect, and who does not expect us to be perfect. We need one who can forgive our imperfection and save us in spite of it. He lived the perfect life so that He could be the perfect sacrifice that would make it possible to save those who can never be perfect.

The greatest man is not just the one who excels all others in some area, but the one who excels and yet can be one with those who do not excel, or who do not even have the ability to compete. Jesus is the greatest in every area in which He is a competitor, but He is never exclusive of others in any of these areas. Greatness so often leads to pride and an attitude that makes one feel they are no longer brothers with their fellow man. They would admit they are of the same species, but not in the same class. Verse 11 says Jesus is not ashamed to call men His brothers. He had such sympathy and compassion for those who were so far removed from His perfection that He seemed to specialize in coming to their rescue. He loved the woman at the well who was the town slut, and she became one of His most loyal followers. He loved those who were hated by society. The publicans and the harlots

were those he had fellowship with. He even took a thief with Him as the first person to join Him in heaven. His perfection did not take Him away from the sinner at all, but made it possible for Him to bring the sinner up to a higher level because He loved and forgave them.

Among other things, Jesus became a real man so as to reveal to mankind just what man was created to be in relation to God and other people. Jesus demonstrates in an actual human life what man is to be. He is what God made man for, and He is the ideal that all men will be when God's plan is complete. We shall be like Him when we see Him as He is. He became a man to demonstrate the possibility of man living in full obedience to God if they keep their focus on God. Jesus had to pray often and get alone with God to keep his focus right. It was not easy to be a perfect man. He could not do it without staying in touch with His heavenly Father. He said, "I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things." John 8:28. Jesus was dependent completely on the guidance and strength He received from His Father. There is not an hint of pride in Jesus where He claims to be ideal in His own power. He was so fully human that, even though He was the Son of God, He could not be the perfect man without dependence and submission to the Higher Power, which was His heavenly Father. Had He been just a fake man, put on like a mask, it would be no problem for Him to live perfectly as God, but He had to live perfectly as a real man, for only a real man could lay down his life for mankind. The perfect sacrifice had to be a man, and so Jesus had to live the life of a real man to be that perfect sacrifice.

It would be no example to us if God faked living the ideal human life. It is only an example of great value if Jesus lived a real human life and thereby showed that it is possible to stay so close to God that you can overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. We cannot do it perfectly, but His example is a constant challenge to make it our aim to live life as He did.

III THE RESULTS OF HIS HUMANITY

The result of Jesus becoming a man and living the perfect life in the flesh is that it qualified Him to do for us what no one else could do. He could die in our place. He could be our substitute, and pay the penalty for our sin that we might be set free from that penalty, which was death. The result of His humanity is the plan of salvation was able to be completed successfully, and all who will receive Jesus as their Savior are given the promise of eternal life with Him. He took on Himself what we could not do, and by His death He destroyed him who has the power of death. The plan of salvation was God's do it yourself project. Man could not do it, but the God-Man could. Even He could not have done it, however, had He not become man. His humanity was a key factor in the whole process.

I read this interesting account of what a surgeon did decades ago. "On February 15, 1921, there was a doctor who performed an appendectomy. The doctor performing the surgery was Dr. Evan Kane who over his 37-year medical career

had performed nearly 4,000 appendectomies, so this surgery was not at all unusual except for two things.

First of all, this was the first time that local anesthesia had ever been used in major surgery. Dr. Kane believed that local anesthesia was safer than putting a patient completely to sleep. Most of his colleagues agreed with him in principle, but they wanted to see first if it would actually work.

So Dr. Kane searched for a volunteer, a patient who would be willing to undergo surgery while under local anesthesia. It wasn't easy to find one. Most people are squeamish at the thought of being awake during their own surgery. Others are fearful that the anesthesia might wear off too soon.

Finally, though, Dr. Kane found a volunteer, and on Tuesday morning, February 15th, the operation began. The patient was prepped and wheeled into the operating room. A local anesthetic was applied. And as Dr. Kane had done thousands of times before, he cut open the tissues and removed the appendix. The patient had only minor discomfort and recovered quickly, dismissed two days later.

Dr. Kane had proven his theory. Thanks to the willingness of a brave volunteer, Dr. Kane demonstrated that local anesthesia was an alternative, even a preferred alternative.

But I said there were two facts that made this surgery unusual. I've told you the first: the use of local anesthesia. The second unusual thing was the patient -- the patient was Dr. Kane. You see, in order to prove his point, Dr. Kane operated on himself. The doctor became a patient in order to convince the patients to trust the doctor."

You do not have to be a brain surgeon to see how this illustrates what Jesus did for us in becoming a man and dying for our sin. The surgeon was a pioneer who went ahead so others could follow without fear. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He went into the realm of death and faced the power of death and hell and conquered that we might follow Him without fear. You can study all of the great people of history and be awed by their gifts and works, but there is only one who can forgive your sin and promise you a place in God's family forever. There is no competition here, and because Jesus does for us what no one else can, and because what He does is everlasting, it makes Him the sole competitor for the title of the greatest man who ever lived.

V. CHAPTER FIVE. THE GREATEST WARNING

God began human history with a warning. He told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would surely die. Failure to heed that warning led to the fall of man, and failure to heed warnings has ever since led to all of the sin and folly of human beings. It could easily be established that the number one cause of suffering in this world is the neglect of warnings. The task of the prophets was to warn the people of God of the great danger ahead if they did not obey the Word of God. Every time judgment fell on God's people it was because they neglected these warnings.

When we come to the New Testament we see it was the task of the Apostles to do the same thing with the new people of God. In Acts. 20:31 we read these words of Paul, "So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." In I Cor. 4:14 he writes, "I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children." Just as parents need to warn children to protect them from the many dangers in the world, so the prophets and Apostles had to warn the children of God about the many dangers they faced in living a godly life in the world.

As you study the history of mankind you begin to see quite clearly that people tend to fall into two categories: Those who heed warnings, and those who neglect them. In Heb. 11:7 we read, "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family." The rest of the world neglected the warning and perished. Such has been the pattern ever since. People receive the warnings and respond with appropriate actions that lead to escape, or they reject the warnings and receive the negative consequences that are inescapable.

Volumes could be filled with examples, and you probably have some personal experiences of your own to illustrate this reality. Here are just a couple that have found their way into print. "In December of 1994, FBI agent John Wellman was fined about \$1,000 for an October incident in which he was charged with disobeying traffic signs in Keokuk County, Iowa. While trying to locate a man in an investigation, Wellman ignored the directions of a construction crew to drive along the shoulder of the road and instead circumvented barricades and continued to drive on the pavement. Minutes later, he drove his car into 6 inches of freshly poured cement set out to resurface the road, resulting in a \$70,000 expense to the state." "One winter a resort in Breckenridge, Colorado, posted signs instructing skiers to keep off a certain slope. The signs, large and distinct, said, "DANGER! OUT OF BOUNDS! In spite of the warnings, however, several skiers went into the area. The result? A half-mile-wide avalanche buried four of the trespassers beneath tons of snow and rock. This tragedy never would have happened if the signs had been heeded."

One of the key characteristics of the book of Hebrews is that it is a book of warnings. The key theme is the exaltation of Jesus as supreme over all that has

gone before. He is better and superior to all that God gave His people in the Old Testament. But there is so great a danger in neglecting such a higher revelation that the book has to stress this danger, and so it is a book of warnings. If you neglect a balloon floating toward a sharp object you risk losing your balloon. If you neglect the oil in your engine you risk losing your car. If you neglect your mate you risk losing your marriage. The higher the value you neglect, the greater the loss you will suffer. Since Jesus is the highest revelation and the greatest gift of God, far superior to anything God has ever given to man, the greatest loss will be suffered by neglecting so great a salvation as we have in Him. That is why the book of Hebrews is the book of the greatest warnings. The New International Version lists the warnings of this book as:

- 1. Warning to pay attention 2:1-4*
- 2. Warning against unbelief 3:7-19*
- 3. Warning against falling away 5:11-14*
- 4. Warning against refusing God 12:14-29*

For some reason they left out the warning of 10:26-31, which is one of the strongest warnings anywhere. Others include 6:4-8 also as a severe warning.

The Hebrew Christians who receive this letter were facing great dangers, and they needed someone to warn them of these dangers. We need to recognize that every believer is in the same boat with these Hebrew believers. God ordained that we would have this letter for all of history because He knew we would all face these same dangers, and if we do not heed the warnings of this book we will suffer great losses. John W. Lawrence has put together this list of the major dangers being warned about in this letter. I share them because he has done an excellent job of summarizing how these dangers were a part of the history of God's people, and the consequences of their neglect.

“(1) The Danger of Drifting (Heb. 2). The children of Israel who were redeemed by blood and by power, drifted from the truth at Mount Sinai, and they made a golden calf. It cost the physical life of 5,000 saved Israelites. So the question is asked us: “How shall we escape if we drift from so great salvation?”

(2) The Danger of Not Entering into Rest (Heb. 3-4). After leaving Mount Sinai, the nation of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. The nation and generation that accepted His salvation perished in the wilderness because they refused to continue a life of faith. Over a million perished. We are not only saved “by faith,” but “the just shall live by faith.” Here is the danger for us of doubting, of not walking by faith as a believer, and of missing His rest and His best.

(3) The Danger of Not Going on to Maturity (Heb. 5-6). This was the state of the nation after entering into Canaan under the judges, the kings and the prophets. They never grew up as a nation. They were never able to use the Word of God in

their lives. They never applied it to life's situations. The result was that thousands upon thousands perished in the sieges and conflicts of the Assyrian and Babylonian Captivities.

(4) The Danger of the Willful Sin (Heb. 10). Here is a picture of the nation at the time of the first coming of Christ. They kept on sinning willfully. Christ even spoke a parable against those of His generation (Luke 20:9-16,19; cf. Matt. 21:43). Consequently the Lord Himself said: "The blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world (shall) be required of this generation" (Luke 11:50). Josephus tells us that millions of Jews perished in A.D. 70 under the Roman, General Titus. The nation had committed the willful sin.

(5) The Danger of Indifference.(Heb 12). This will yet be the sin of the nation of Israel during the coming tribulation. The Lord speaks in Matthew 25:1-13 of the five wise and five foolish virgins, and shows the indifference on part of even those who profess. Many will not patiently endure. The Old Testament prophets have prophesied that two-thirds of the nation of Israel will perish in the tribulation period because they are indifferent to spiritual realities."

In a simpler outline he puts it this way:

Drifting from the Word -- 2:1-4

Doubting the Word -- 3:7 - 4:13

Dullness toward the Word -- 5:11 - 6:20

Despising the Word -- 10:26-39

Defying the Word -- 12:14-29

The first danger, that of drifting away, and of neglecting so great salvation, is the primary danger, for it leads to all the rest of them. If people are drifting away and paying no attention to the revelation of God, then all the dangers that are possible are likely. The most dangerous thing a believer can do in life is to ignore what they have heard and neglect the great salvation they have in Jesus. Someone said that to hear and not heed is to cook and then not eat. It is foolishness.

We live in a world with more options than ever before. The Hebrew Christians had the temptation to slip back into Judaism and trust in the law, or to look to angels as the prime messengers of God's will for them, but today we have the temptation of many cults who can and do seduce believers to follow other ways than Him who is the Way. There are so many cults and religious sites on the

internet that it is impossible for Christians to escape reading the messages of those who would lead us away from Jesus as our supreme authority and Savior. We need to be warned not to listen to and follow those who in any way reduce Jesus from the place of the highest. Any message that puts Jesus in second place to anyone or anything is not the message of God, and to give heed to it is to neglect our great salvation, and it is a failure to heed the greatest warning.

The great salvation we are never to neglect is the salvation that comes to us through the Sovereign, Supreme, Superior, Sufficient Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. All the warnings of this book are designed to make sure that Jesus remains the supreme love and loyalty of our lives. The greatest warning is to not drift from this solid rock foundation, and to not neglect giving this the major attention in our lives. The author specializes in telling us to look to Jesus; consider Jesus, and fix your eyes on Jesus. If we give heed to the greatest warning to never neglect Jesus, then we will experience the greatest blessings and escape the greatest dangers. The essence of the greatest warning is, do not neglect the greatest Word God has given to man, which is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us.

It is inexcusable to ignore the great salvation that is given in Jesus, for it has been made clear through three sources that it is the greatest salvation ever. In verses 3 and 4 the author gives us these three sources of information.

1. It was first announced by the Lord.
2. It was confirmed by eyewitnesses who heard Him.
3. It was testified to by God through signs, wonders, miracles; gifts of the Spirit.

The bottom line is that all three persons of the Godhead were involved in making this salvation clear to man, and there were human witnesses who also give testimony to its reality. To ignore and neglect a message of such great importance, and with such authority behind it, is to court disaster of the worst kind. People ignore warnings of all kinds and suffer loss, but to ignore a warning of this magnitude is to risk suffering the very wrath of God. The Old Testament warnings came to the people of God through His messengers the angels, and neglect of them led to severe punishment of God's people. The Old Testament is filled with suffering and sorrow that came upon God's people because they paid no attention to the warnings. How much greater can you expect the judgment to be on those who pay no attention to the greatest message even given, and the greatest warning about neglecting it? There is no way to escape the obvious conclusion that Christians can experience the judgment of God in time as well as in the final day of judgment.

There is much debate as to how great a loss a Christian can suffer. Some go so far as to say they can even lose their salvation, and others say this can never be,

but they will lose their rewards. We will consider this debate when we get to the controversial texts. Whatever the case, the loss will be great, and it is pure folly to lose what is meant to be ours as children of the King. In I Cor. 3 Paul writes about those who build with wood, hay and stubble, and that these things will be tested by fire. In v. 15 he says, "If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." Only a very foolish Christian can be content to be saved, but lose all of the rewards Christ made it possible for them to enjoy for eternity. It is wonderful to escape from a burning house with your life, but far greater is it to have a house that fire cannot touch. The warnings of this book need to be taken seriously so that we get the full salvation that Jesus died for us to have. A minimal salvation is to be avoided, for the maximum salvation is available, and we can claim it all by paying attention to what God has revealed through Jesus, His greatest prophet and spokesman.

Dr. John Allan Lavender describes a scene that may be what is to be experienced by those who live life without paying attention to what they have heard. He writes, "Picture yourself on that day. You are standing in the great receiving line of heaven. You are looking forward to meeting the Savior face to face. Perhaps you are standing beside some prominent and well-known Christian. On the other hand, you may be standing beside some dear, sweet, unknown, unremembered saint who simply lived out a life of faithfulness praying for those who did the things she could not do herself.

You stretch to catch a glimpse of Jesus as He welcomes the saints into glory. Finally, He comes to stand before the one who is beside you. As you strain to hear every word that falls from His blessed lips, you hear Him say, "Well done, prominent person," or "Well done, unremembered saint; well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord."

Then comes that moment for which every true believer has longed. You are face to face with Jesus. But, as you look, you see a gaze of sadness come into His eyes and He asks, "Where are your trophies? Have you no rewards?" And you hear yourself say, "No, Lord, my works were consumed by fire."

It is the purpose of the great warnings of this book to make sure no believer has to experience the unbelievable sorrow of such a scene. Pay attention! Pay attention! Pay attention! That is the message of the whole Bible, and that is the message of all that we do in preaching and teaching and in worship and fellowship. Everything is designed to keep us with a focus on Jesus as the Savior, and as the author and perfecter of our faith. Don't look away, don't wander, and don't ignore the warning signs that you might be drifting from the only dock where there is security.

Pay attention to the warning.

**Do not slip and drift away.
Such great folly leads to mourning
When you see what price you pay.**

**Jesus died to give us God's best.
He gave all that we might see,
And enjoy forever God's rest
With Him in eternity.**

**But we daily face the danger
Of not heeding what we've heard.
We treat Jesus as a stranger
Instead as the Living Word.**

**So please heed the greatest warning
That the ears of man can hear.
So that on that judgment morning
You will hear the Savior cheer.**

**You have fully obeyed my will.
You have lived worthy of me.
It is my joy to see you thrill
As your rewards now you see.**

You might conclude that you do not like the book of Hebrews because it is too negative, critical and judgmental. That is how most every child feels about their parents at some point in life. We feel that way about teachers also, for they are forever putting red marks on our papers and tests. We don't seem to be able to get through life without critics. And more often than not they are a pain in the neck. Ray Stedman gives a good example from a comic strip.

Snoopy was having the time of his life as he was spinning and twirling on the frozen pond. It was so much fun. But then Lucy showed up and hollered at Snoopy, "That's not skating. That's sliding! You don't have skates on! You're just sliding on your feet! That's not skating!" Poor Snoopy slinks off to the side of the pond and thinks, "How could I be so stupid?" In the last scene he is sitting on a bench and saying, "I thought I was having fun." The critic ruined everything for him,

and this is often the case, but the fact is, we sometimes need the critic to help us have fun and enjoy life to its fullest. All who develop any gift and skill need the help of the expert to give constructive criticism to enable them to become all that they can become.

We need criticism to become the Christian that God wants us to be. That is why we have the Bible, and especially the letters of the New Testament. They are very critical of the failures of the Christian to live on the highest level. They are filled with warnings, as we see in this letter, for the purpose of keeping us on track, or of getting us back on track when we have fallen off. We need to recognize that the criticism and warnings are not negative, but positive. They are in the same category with the loving warnings of parents that are designed to prevent suffering and sorrow. We need to appreciate them just as we do when the highway department puts up warnings signs that prevent us from doing something stupid that will kill or injure us. Most warnings are positive in purpose. They are for the purpose of giving you information that will benefit you if you pay attention to their message. A bottle of what looks like a cool and refreshing liquid with a skull and crossbones on it is a blessing. We are to be thankful for the warning sign, for without it you can misuse it and die. All the warnings of this book are for the same reason, that you might avoid folly and achieve success in the Christian life. Thank God for this book that is filled with the greatest warnings.

You can look at salvation as salvation period; end of story. You are saved by grace and justified, and that is all there is. Or you can look at it as salvation plus; no end to the story. It is a free gift of God that you receive by faith, but there is another stage of salvation called sanctification. In this stage you work with God to develop the abundant life with the fruits of the Spirit. In the first stage you have no input, for it was all accomplished by Jesus on the cross, and all you can do it receive it as a gift. In the second stage you can cooperate with God and do many things to become more of the person He wants you to be. You can become more like Jesus, and live a holy life that lets your light shine and bring glory to your Father in heaven. You can develop gifts in cooperation with the Holy Spirit that make you a fruitful servant in touching many other lives. This salvation plus is what the Christian life is all about. If justification was the end of salvation then we could all die the moment we receive Christ as Savior, for that would be the highest level we could reach. This is not the case, and we are left on earth to grow in grace and knowledge that we might live a life that is pleasing to God. The only way to do this is to keep our eyes on Jesus and give heed to the need to pay attention to what we have heard in the Word. If we do this we are gaining the benefits of wisely responding to His greatest warning.

VI. CHAPTER SIX. THE GREATEST FOCUS

There are no end to the things we can think of and focus our attention upon, but the greatest focus of all is to focus our thoughts on Jesus. That is the focus of the Bible from beginning to end. That is to be the focus of all that we do in church, and in all the meetings and activities of the church. There is no higher subject for the mind to consider than Jesus. The text says, "fix your thoughts on Jesus.." He is to be the primary food for our thinking. He is not to be a now and then snack, but the full meal of each day. The mind needs a focus for there to be a primary goal of all our thinking, and that focus is to be Jesus.

Notice, the call to consider Jesus is not addressed to the outsider, or to the part time believer who is just playing at being a Christian. It is addressed to the holy brethren. The implication is clear that you can never get so holy and mature as a Christian that you do not need to make Jesus the central focus of your thinking. It is not as if you learn about Jesus and then go on to other things. You never cease to make Him the focus of your learning, for in Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Every subject we study is to be related to Jesus. The little child who sings Jesus loves me this I know, and the aged saint who has read the Bible for over fifty years need to have the same focus, and that is a mind fixed on Jesus. You cannot be too young or too old to make Him the greatest focus of your life.

**Holy brothers with a calling
To share in heaven's glory
Let your mind run without stalling
Focused on the great story.**

**It's the greatest story ever
That the world can ever hear.
For from His love none can sever
His presence is always near.**

**Let your mind be fixed on Jesus
There's no greater food for thought.
It is His desire to please us,
For by His blood we are bought.**

**May this mind be in you and me
So that we are never bored.
And may we daily come to see**

Life's best is focus on the Lord.

The best sermons, the best books, the best Sunday School lessons, the best Bible studies, the best articles and the best of everything you can hear or read are those things that help you fix your thoughts on Jesus. He is to be the magnet that continually draws our mind to focus on Him. In contrast, whatever takes your attention away from Jesus and all He was and taught has the potential of being a danger to your soul. Of course, we all go many hours of each day without thinking of Jesus, but when we do begin to use our minds for study that will lead us to know and do the will of God, our focus is to be on Him. That is the whole focus of this book of Hebrews. In every way possible the author goes through all the values of the Old Testament and then focuses on Jesus as their fulfillment and completion. He is to be our focus because He has made all that came before Him obsolete or secondary. He is superior to all that have gone before, and that is why He is to be the focus of our theology and practice.

When people get their minds off Jesus they tend to fix on other things that lead to all kinds of conflict. There are so many different views of contemporary issues among believers, and this leads to much conflict that produces bitter fighting among the family of God. It makes me think of the preacher who wrote a book titled Come To Jesus. Later he became angry at another preacher who disagreed with him on some issue and he wrote another book tearing the man apart. He asked a friend what he should name the book. The friend read the bitter language of the book and said, "What not call it Go To The Devil by the author of Come to Jesus." The man got the point that he was over reacting and did not publish his attack. He had gotten his mind off Jesus, and let it get fixed on some issue that led him to be unlike Jesus. When you begin to have attitudes and actions in your life that are inconsistent with Jesus, you know your mind is not focused on Him, but on something that you have made more important to you than Him. This is the modern idolatry. Anything or anyone, or any idea that makes you unlike Christ is an idol at that point, and we need to crush it by getting refocused on Jesus.

There are many believers who are more law centered than Lord centered, and this can be a pain for all the fellow believers they try to bring into bondage to their legalism, but it will be a worse pain for them when they are judged to have been idolaters for putting the law above Jesus. This was the danger the Hebrews faced, for they were tempted to go back to the law of Moses and put him on a higher level than God's highest, final and greatest revelation in His Son. This would be a form of idolatry because it would be putting what has become secondary in the place of the primary. This chapter goes on to warn of the judgment that God's people suffered because of their unbelief and rebellion, and that is just what it would be to take your focus off Jesus and put it on Moses, the High Priest, or the temple. Fix your mind on Jesus or you will be in a fix for sure is the essence of this chapter.

Moses was the greatest Jew who ever lived up until the time of Jesus. He was special in God's plan, and God had a special relationship with him. Numbers 12:6-8 reveals God's testimony to Moses: "Hear now my words: if there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, shall make myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. 7 not so, with my servant Moses, he is faithful in all my household; 8 with him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings, and he beholds the form of the Lord." He is the only one to see God as he did. In Ex. 7:1 God says of Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet." God never made any man like a God except Moses. God used him as no other man. He gave the law to His people through Moses, and led them out of Egypt by him. He was special and this book acknowledges him to have been a faithful servant in the house of God. But Jesus is as superior to Moses as a Son is superior to the best of the servants. Therefore, to fix your eyes on Moses and take them off of Jesus is to live in disobedience to the clear revelation of God, and this is to risk judgment. You can see why it was hard for the Jews to take Moses off the pedestal and put Jesus there instead. It was a breaking of the oldest tradition of the Jews. It was no easy matter making Jesus the primary and greatest focus of life.

As you study history you discover that the reason good people fail and fall from God's best is always because they get their minds fixed on what is less than God's best. Adam and Eve took their focus from obedience to God and focused on the forbidden fruit, and this was the end of paradise. Every fall from that point on was for the same reason. David took his eyes off obedience to God and put them on the beauty of Bathsheba and he fell. Solomon took his eyes off the wisdom of God and focused on pleasing his foreign wives and this led to idolatry and a fall. Peter was the only man to walk on water with Jesus, but he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the raging waves and down he went. People are always sunk when they cease to focus on Jesus. That is the whole point of Hebrews. You will miss God's best when you do not keep Jesus as your primary focus in life. Biblical theology is really quite simple: fix your mind on Jesus or you are in a fix.

What Hebrews is saying to the people it is written to, goes on saying to us today who may have no temptation to go back to Moses and the Old Testament law and its rituals of atonement, but who still have the danger of putting someone or something in place of Jesus as our primary focus. We tend to become people worshipers because there are people who are truly great in many ways and deserved to be honored. But when we honor them to the point that we exalt them and their ideas above the Lord Jesus we are in danger of idolatry, just as if we bowed before a golden calf. The point is that Jesus is the greatest in every way, and anything we do to lessen His greatness in our mind is a rejection of God's revelation.

Charles Jefferson wrote, "When we leave the New Testament and walk among the nations of the earth where shall we find a man with whom we should be willing to compare Jesus of Nazareth? Can you think of an Italian or a German or a Frenchman or an Englishman or an American whose name is worthy to be linked with his? The heart draws back shuddering at the suggestion of such a thought.

Great men have come and gone, doing their mighty deeds and leaving behind names which shall not die, but what race or nation would dare even in its most egotistic and vainglorious moments to suggest that the most illustrious of all its sons has a right to sit on a throne so high as the throne of Jesus? His soul is like a star and dwells apart. He is unique, and unapproachable. He is the incomparable." When we have this conviction we will not be so enamored by any other greatness to the point where we neglect our focus on Jesus.

The Hebrew people took a great chance in leaving Egypt and following Moses into the wilderness. It was a brave risk they took, but it was not enough to get them into the promised land, for a good start is not the same as a good finish. Many start great, but end far from great. They were delivered from Egypt, but it was not an end in itself. The goal was to get into the land of promise, but they failed to enter it. Jude sums it up in Jude 1:5, "Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe." Why remind Christians about such folly of the Jews? It is because the same folly is going on all the time, and people who should be having God's best are missing out because they have missed the importance of perpetually focusing on Jesus.

The Old Testament people of God were blessed with an abundance of miracles, and they had the greatest of leaders, and yet, they still rebelled against God's will and plan for them. They missed their purpose in life by their constant departing from obedience. Moses was a marvelous leader, but he risked his life in trying to lead this people. On one occasion when the people had grown tired and weary "Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." (Exodus 17:2-4) Centuries later nothing had changed, and these people's descendants killed their Messiah. The point of all this folly being recorded in God's Word is that every generation might see the weakness of human nature and the tendency toward disobedience. Paul makes this clear in I Cor. 10:9-11, "We should not test the Lord, as some of them did--and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did--and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come."

It is because of this tendency that exists for all time in all people that we must recognize that the greatest focus for all people in all times is to be Jesus. The quickest way to depart from God and His will is to take our minds off Jesus. The history of Christian sin and folly can be traced to this one factor, and that is that believers have filled their minds with something other than Jesus. He has ceased to be their primary focus in life, and the end result is disobedience to His will, which brings judgment. Jesus was not just another Moses, a great leader of the house of God. He was the builder of the house. He has greater honor because of His superior role in relation to the house of God. He is the Apostle and High priest whom we confess. He is the one who made us the house of God. The greatest honor goes to the one who made the beautiful mansion, and not just to the one who happens to live in it. The glory belongs to the Maker, and that is Jesus.

There are so many distractions in the world and in the church that it is a constant need to be challenged to focus on Jesus. We can get caught up in controversy over dozens of issues such as healing, tongues, music, worship styles, cults and the occult, abortion, war, methods of mission and evangelism, mystical experiences, and on and on. But none of these are to be the foundation on which we build, for as soon as we make anything our foundation but Jesus we begin to sink our part of the house of God, for we are building on sand rather than the solid Rock. Paul makes this clear in 1Cor 3:10-11, "According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another builds thereon. But let every man take heed how he builds thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

An ancient Irish hymn put the essence of what Hebrews is saying in verse about making Jesus the greatest focus. Mary Byrne translated it into English.

**Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.**

**Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.**

**Be Thou my battle Shield, Sword for the fight;
Be Thou my Dignity, Thou my Delight;
Thou my soul's Shelter, Thou my high Tower:
Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.**

**Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always:
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.**

**High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.**

The author goes on in verse 2 to stress the faithfulness of Jesus. Moses was also faithful in God's house, but the text here does not mention that Moses was unfaithful once, and that failure led to his not being allowed by God to enter the promised land. Jesus was not once unfaithful to the will of God. The faithfulness of Jesus is a theme that runs all through the Bible, and is another reason why we need to keep our focus on Him, for He is to be our example perpetually in all situations in life. As 13:8 stresses, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." He is ever faithful. Jesus is even named faithful in the book of Revelation.

Revelation 3:14

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation."

Revelation 19:11

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war."

Because He is faithful we can have courage and hope that keeps us on track as part of the house of God. We can count on Jesus to be with us, to understand us, to forgive us, and to empower us to overcome all temptations and be victorious in the battles of life. Because He is ever faithful, we too can be faithful in living in obedience to God, and not fall away into disobedience. The people of God in the Old Testament doubted the faithfulness of God and they grumbled and complained and just became impossible to lead as an obedient house of God. Their unfaithful spirit led to them missing out on God's rest, and that is the risk that all take who doubt the faithfulness of Jesus. Those who take their eyes off Jesus and begin to look elsewhere for security will find themselves sinking into quicksand when the storms of life come. It is only when we stay focused on Jesus that we will find He alone can still the storm and faithfully guide us to shore.

When we stay focused on Jesus and His faithfulness we can be over-comers rather than quitters, as were the saints of old coming out of Egypt. They just could not believe that God would be faithful to His promise and lead them into the land of freedom and rest. They rebelled all along the way, and never made it because of their rebellion. We need not repeat their folly if we trust in the faithfulness of Jesus to lead us all the way. He had promised to be with us and lead us to the Father's house where He had gone to prepare a place for us. He is faithful to empower us to overcome all temptation. I Cor. 10:13 says,

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Because of the faithfulness of God and His Son, we can be assured of victory if we keep our focus on Him and not on self, or any other foundation. Our confidence and courage come from our focus on Him and His faithfulness. When we look away to find our courage and confidence in any other source we risk defeat, and that is why Jesus is to be our greatest focus. He has been where we are. He knows the trials of temptation from experience. He knows the pain of rejection and disappointment. He knows all the sorrows of life, and yet He was faithful to accomplish the will of God through perfect obedience. He knows it is not easy, but extremely difficult to always be faithful, and to always be courageous and hopeful. He knows just how much we need help to even come close to being all God wants us to be. That is why we need to keep our focus on Him, for there is no one else who can help us as He can.

Verse 6 also refers to the hope of which we boast. It is not only courage but hope that comes from a focus on Jesus. He is our hope, for there is no other that even offers

us the hope of eternal life. Hope is a key factor in survival in a fallen world. Lose hope and you lose all reason to continue the battle. As long as there is hope there is reason to keep pressing on however hard the march. In some of the great marches of war prisoners many just gave up and laid down and died because they had no hope of surviving the march anyway. They thought it meaningless to keep going without hope. They just as well die now as later, and so they did. Viktor Frankl saw the same thing in the Nazi concentration camp. He saw men who were as healthy as other just lay down and die because they lost hope. Others went on enduring all the terrible ordeal of hunger and suffering of all kinds because they never gave up hope. A focus on Jesus is what gives us an undying hope that keeps us going no matter what. Hoppers are never quitters, and that is why we must never cease to focus on Jesus as our eternal hope.

Jesus is to be our greatest focus just because He is able to do for us what no one else can ever do. Someone has compiled a list of what Jesus does for us, and this list should make it clear why He and He alone is to be our perpetual focus all through life. As you read this list you need only ask yourself, "Is there anyone in my life, or in all of history, who deserves to have my focused attention more than Jesus?"

He loves us (John 15:13; Rom. 8:35).

He brings us to God (1 Tim. 2:5).

He brings God to us (Col. 1:15).

He bought us for God (Eph. 1:7).

He defends us before God (1 John 2:1).

He declares us "not guilty" (Rom. 3:24; 5:1).

He reconciles us to God (2 Cor. 5:19).

He sets us apart for God (1 Cor. 1:30).

He gives us peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

He makes us acceptable to God (Eph. 1:6).

He forgives us (Eph. 1:7).

He frees us from bondage (Rom. 8:2).

He qualifies us for adoption (Eph. 1:5).

He makes us heirs of God (Eph. 1:11).

He gives us His Spirit (John 14:16-17).

He gives us a new focus (Col. 3:1-2).

He lives within us (Col. 1:27).

He brings us into God's family (John 1:12).

He intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34).

He rescues us from Satan's power (Col. 1:13).

He places us into God's kingdom (Col. 1:13).

He gives us eternal life (Rom. 6:23).

He shows us how to live (1 John 2:6).

It is overwhelming to consider all that Jesus has done for us who trust Him as our Savior. We know we cannot be thinking of Jesus every minute of the day, but He is to be the focus of our attention wherever we have to make decisions and choices in life. What would Jesus do? is a valid question to be asking all the time. It is not easy to answer all the time, but it is where our minds should be focused when we struggle with issues of all kinds. Christians will differ in how they answer that question, but it is still the most vital question to be struggling with, for Paul makes it clear in Rom. 14 that when Christians are convinced in their own minds that they are choosing as Jesus would choose they are in His will even if they are on opposite sides from other believers. In other words, if you focus on Jesus and can come to a conclusion that you are acting in harmony with the mind of Jesus, then you are pleasing in His sight even if you differ in conviction from fellow believers.

Christians are at all different levels of maturity in their journey of life with Jesus, and this means there will be different perspectives, but all are pleasing to Jesus when they are focused on Him as their guide and point of reference. They may be misunderstanding the perspective of Jesus, but as long as they are seeking to know His mind they are walking in obedience. Paul says in Rom. 14:5, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." When that is the case two Christians may come out with opposite views on a controversial issue, but each is in God's will when they are convinced their perspective is consistent with the mind of Christ. This is the liberty that we have in Christ. We are not to be legalistic like the Jews and be always bound by numerous laws that regulate our every action and thought.

We are free in Christ to strive to be like Him. This will mean that some believers will be offensive to others because they will be in circumstances where they will be trying to love those that other believers cannot stand and are fighting. You may despise lawyers, but there are Christian lawyers who are loving them even when they do evil. You may despise people in all sorts of professions who do what hurts people, but there are Christians who relate to those people in love and seek to win them to Christ. You have every right to despise the witch doctors who deceive and manipulate people with superstition and occult powers, but some believers are inviting them to

their homes and befriending them in hopes of touching them for Christ. You may be thoroughly convinced that Sunday is the proper day of worship to honor the day that Jesus rose from the dead, but there are millions who prefer to worship on Saturday to keep the Sabbath as God first commanded. Can both be right? Yes they can, according to Paul, for both are striving to focus on the mind of Christ and act accordingly. The point is, you cannot be wrong when your focus is on Jesus with a desire to do what pleases Him. You may be short of the ideal, but you still please Him because that is your will. It is like the child who brings dandelions to mom. It is not the greatest gift and her ideal, but it pleases her because the motive was to please her. It is an act of love and she responds in love. So it is with Jesus when we strive to do and think in ways that please Him. We may fall short of the ideal, but we succeed in our goal just because our focus is on Him. Ronald E. Guilfoyle has written a poem that illustrates how we are to point to Jesus as the focus point and not to ourselves.

If you are looking at me...
You are looking at the wrong one.
I have fallen far too short,
But look to what Jesus has done.

Isn't he supposed to be a Christian?,
You look at me and ponder,
Yes, I am. But I am still a sinner.
Sometimes, I even wonder.

All I can tell you is this:
Don't trust in me and my example.
Trust in Jesus' righteousness.
His mercy and grace are ample.

Read of Jesus and His life's works.
Jesus will never lead you astray.
Don't expect me to live sinless,
For I, on the other hand, very well may.

I don't want to mislead you,
Least of all, not by my acts.
Jesus, not I, is the Savior.
That, dear friend, is one of the facts.

You look and ask the question:
Aren't you supposed to do good?
Yes, that is my goal, dear friend.
Yet, I can't succeed as only Christ could.

I can make up excuses all day.

It doesn't make my actions right.
But thank God for Jesus, whose yoke is easy...
And whose burden is light.

When you see me fail, perhaps often...
I'm walking in the flesh.
When I trust fully in God and ask of Him,
God's Holy Spirit fills me afresh.

It is then that I can be
The man God wants me to be.
Not by myself, but by His help...
Only by His grace and mercy.

The bottom line is, Christianity is not a focus on laws; it is not a focus on ritual; it is not a focus on behavior; it is not a focus on self-sufficiency. It is a focus on a Person. Christianity is Christ in the heart and mind. It is Christ in you the hope of glory. It is a focus on Jesus as the greatest Savior, the greatest High Priest and Intercessor, the greatest Person in our lives for time and eternity. It is a keeping our eyes on Jesus all through life as the GREATEST FOCUS of our lives.

VII. CHAPTER SEVEN. THE GREATEST REST

Heaven is so appealing because it is a place where all negatives are forever eliminated. No more war and struggle on every level, but peace and security with all threats gone. It is a place of rest from all the strife of life. God's goal is to share with all of His people the blessedness of rest, which is the satisfaction that comes with a job well done and a task completed. He finished His creation and rested, and He commanded His people to do the same. The Sabbath was to be a taste of heaven where labor is replaced by leisure, and where enjoyment was to replace employment. The Promised Land was a part of this same picture. It was to be a place where His people dwelled in peace and prosperity in contrast to being slaves for centuries in Egypt, and living in poverty. The Sabbath and Promised Land were a taste of the ultimate in God's plan for His people. They were a taste of heaven.

These were mere shadows of better things to come, however, and they were never adequate to accomplish the goal of giving people God's experience of rest. The Sabbath became a burden to people rather than a blessing because the Pharisees made so many laws to regulate it that it became a pain. The Promised Land never became a place of

peace and rest because of the disobedience of the people and its history is one of warfare and much disappointment. The children of Israel never did enter into the fullness of the rest that God had for them, and so there remains yet a Sabbath-rest for the people of God. It is still God's goal to give rest to His people, and it is still the great challenge of His people to enter into that rest. That is the essence of the message of Hebrews chapter 4. God's plan has not failed just because His people failed to receive and achieve it. He wants His people to enter into His rest, and every generation of believers is expected to do so.

Our rest is not found in the Sabbath, even though the principle of resting one day in seven is still valid, and our rest is not in the Promised Land, for that was exclusive to Israel alone. Our rest is in the Person of Jesus Christ who is our Sabbath and our Promised Land. Jesus said in Matt. 11:28-29, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus is our rest, and in Him alone do we find all the peace and comfort that God wills for us to have. He is our Promised Land where we live in peace with God. He is the greatest rest because in Him we have rest for our souls. It is not merely rest of the body that we have in Him. It is rest of the soul, which means that we have in Him an inner peace with God that is a real taste of heaven. The Sabbath only gave rest for the body and it was temporary, but in Jesus we have rest for the soul that is permanent. The rest we have in Jesus is like the appetizer of a great meal. It will be followed by that great meal which is the marriage supper of the Lamb, which is the beginning of the eternal banquet we call heaven.

Hebrews 4 is the great rest chapter of the Bible, for the word rest is used 9 times in this chapter, and that is more than any other entire book of the Bible. It is an important subject because it is an important part of God's plan for man, and the people He chose to experience His best in time failed to experience it because of their unbelief. God gave up on them and swore they would not enter into His rest, but He never gave up on getting people to enter that rest. Man's disobedience and failure will not stop God from achieving His goal, and so there always remains a rest. There always remains the danger of missing it also, and that is what this chapter is about. The promise remains of a rest, but the same problem of unbelief also exists, and so the writer is warning this new generation of God's people to take heed that they do not miss God's rest because of a hardened heart of unbelief that caused so many in the past to miss it. God is going to have a people who will enjoy His rest with Him for all eternity, and they will be a people who enjoy a strong taste of that eternal rest in time, but the only way to be a part of this people is to be a person of faith and not a person of unbelief.

We start with the belief that the promise of rest is still valid. Verse 1 says the promise of entering his rest still stands. In verse 3 it says we who have believed enter that rest. In verse 6 it says it still remains that some will enter that rest. Verse 9 says there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, and finally in verse 11 it says, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest..." The Old Testament people of God missed it, but the New Testament people of God still have the chance to enter God's rest, and that is

God's will for all believers. This is not a popular subject, but it should be, for it is one of God's goals for His people and it should be a high priority in the life of every believer to enter God's rest. The implication is that we have already entered His rest by believing in Jesus as Savior, but that we have not fully entered into His rest because we have not yet made every effort to do so. In other words, it is easy to get in by belief, but to get deeply into His rest so as to experience the fullness of it calls for determined effort on our part. There is more to the rest that can be ours in Christ than being saved. It is one thing to step into a house, but it is another to own that house and enjoy all of its benefits. Salvation is just the beginning of the rest that we find in Jesus. To get a greater view of what is involved I want to look at some characteristics of the rest that can be ours by means of topics that come under the letters R, E, S, T.

I. RELAX

When God finished creation He was not exhausted, for He is all powerful and does not need rest, but He did it anyway to illustrate that there is a time to relax and enjoy what you have made and not be always working to make more. Many people live their whole lives in making money and fame and other things, but do not take the time to relax from their labors to enjoy what they have made, and what God has made for them to enjoy. God is no workaholic and He expects His children to imitate Him. Reach a goal and then relax and enjoy it. Verse 10 stresses this: "For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His." This has implications in both the physical and spiritual realm. A Sabbath for the body where we just cease all labor for things and have a relaxing time to enjoy them is a part of God's plan for His people. Those who never take a day off to relax, and those who never take a vacation from work are not living in obedience to the principles that God has laid down for His people. The workaholic is a sinner, even if they are working for God, for they are living in defiance of His plan for them.

In the spiritual realm the idea of relaxing is crucial for the happy and wholesome life of the believer. The abundant life Jesus came to give us involves this spiritual relaxing and entering into rest. Spiritual resting is a matter of awareness that we do not have to labor for our salvation, but wholly lean on Jesus. So many believers are infected with the false idea of salvation by works that they never relax and enjoy what they have freely received in Jesus. They do not have confidence that they are saved by Him alone and so they feel the pressure of having to do so much to have assurance that they will be saved. This leads to guilt for not doing enough and endless pressure to always be doing more. They can never fully relax and enjoy the gift Jesus purchased for them. They have not grasped what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God---not by works, [we are to rest from our own works!] so that no one can boast." When Jesus said "it is finished" it was finished. His blood atoned for all sin and made it possible for us to be forgiven and accepted into the family of God. There is nothing we can add to His work to be saved. We need only accept His finished work and relax and enjoy the gift of eternal life. This means that entering His rest is having a total confidence in Him and what He has done that we

are released from all pressure to save ourselves.

The Old Testament people of God had no confidence in God. In spite of all the miracles they saw they never ceased to doubt and complain. They expected God to abandon them in the desert, and they expected God to let them down and be defeated if they entered the promised land. They always expected the worst and never had faith that God would work on their behalf. This unbelief made them miss God's best and they never entered His rest. Ray Stedman writes about how this is still a problem today for the people of God. He writes,

"Failure to expect God to act caused the disobedience of Israel in the wilderness, and a similar failure destroys thousands today. It is called overachieving now, but it is the cause for most of the breakdown of Christians under the pressure of stress or responsibility. Pastors and teachers particularly have often been taught that they are personally responsible to meet the emotional needs and to solve the relational problems of all in their congregations. Many sincerely attempt this but soon find themselves overwhelmed with unending demands and a growing sense of their own failure. Relief can come only by learning to operate out of rest and by sharing responsibility with others in the congregation whom God has also equipped with gifts of ministry."

Entering the rest that is ours in Jesus is a matter of becoming more and more confident in Him and in His working in and through us. When we lack confidence we feel we must do everything ourselves. We are not surrendered and so we can never fully relax with a sense of assurance. We are in Christ, but not deep enough to fully experience the sanctification that enables us to fully relax. It is really all a matter of the level of our faith. Faith comes in all sizes from little faith to great faith, and the more we move toward great faith the more we can enter into God's rest and relax.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "The stars do their work without fuss; God does His work without fuss, and saints do their work without fuss. The people who are always desperately active are a nuisance; it is through the saints who are one with Him that God is doing things all the time. The broken and the jaded and the twisted are being ministered to by God through the saints who are not overcome by their own panic, who because of their oneness with Him are absolutely at rest, consequently He can work through them. A sanctified saint remains perfectly confident in God, because sanctification is not something the Lord gives me, sanctification is Himself in me. There is only one holiness, the holiness of God, and only one sanctification, the sanctification that has its origin in Jesus Christ. **"But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, Who was made unto us . . . sanctification"** (1 Corinthians 1:30). A sanctified saint is at leisure from himself and his own affairs, confident that God is bringing all things out well."

The bottom line is that Jesus is our rest, and the greatest rest for it can be experienced in time, and will be experienced for all eternity by those who put their trust in Him. Enter into it believer and avoid all of the stress that comes to those who think they must save themselves by their works. Trust in His finished work and relax. - Karleen E. Wickham

has captured the essence of this point in her poem **I Wore Your Flesh**.

"Shut out the world's craving din,"

He says, "and come with me in

To a quiet place. Rest your soul

And feed on honeyed sweets.

I will not sneer at your triumphs

Or gloat over your defeats,

Neither condemn you, close to my heart.

My love is not based on your success.

I wore your flesh and know it aches;

I long to ease your wretchedness.

Don't be afraid to tell me all.

Trust me with your doubts and cares

And hidden things that devour you:

Well I know the tempter's snares.

I will gentle you with my hand.

I wore your flesh, I understand.

Arthur W. Pink has a paragraph on the invitation of Christ to come to Him for rest that is a gem. He writes, "What a claim to make! This was something which no mere man, no matter how godly and spiritual, could promise. Abraham, Moses, David could not have bidden the weary and heavy laden to come unto him with the assurance that they would give them rest! To impart rest of soul to another lies beyond the power of the most exalted creature. Even the holy angels in Heaven are quite incapable of bestowing rest upon others, for they are entirely dependent upon the grace of God for their own rest. How this promise of Christ, then, makes manifest His uniqueness. Neither Confucius, Buddha, nor Mohammed ever made such a claim as this. Ah, my reader, it was no mere Man who uttered these words: "Come unto Me all ye that art weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Though appearing in the form of a Servant, yet was He, in Himself, infinitely more than that. He was the Son of God incarnate. He was Himself the Creator of man, and therefore could He restore him. He was the Prince of peace and therefore capable of giving rest."

II. ENJOY

The purpose of relaxing from work is so we can enjoy the fruit of our labor. That is what the Sabbath was for God, and He rested in the sense that He stopped working to create in order to just enjoy what He had created. The Sabbath was given to Israel so that His people could enjoy a day of great food and family fun.. The Jews even considered it a special day for husband and wife to enjoy sex. If you study the Jewish practice of the Sabbath you will discover it was a day of celebration. God wants His people to have celebration in their lives. That is why there were so many feast days in the Old Testament. When the Prodigal returned there was a great party of celebration, and it was the same when the lost lamb was found and the when the lost coin was found. People celebrated a lot when their was good news, and the greatest news that can be is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which makes it possible for all who trust in Him to be a part of the eternal banquet that begins the heavenly union of Christ and His bride the Church.

To enter into the greatest rest is to go deeper into the joy of the Lord. Many know and trust in Jesus as Savior, but they have not yet learned to enjoy Him. Part of the problem is what we dealt with in the first point, and that is that they do not trust completely in His finished work, but feel the need to labor to secure their salvation. They cannot rest and enjoy what He has given, for they never know when they have done enough to be acceptable to God. They lose the joy of their salvation because they do not rest and enjoy it, but keep laboring as if it depended on them and their good works to secure their salvation. They have not entered God's rest where they just relax and enjoy the gift. Paul wrote in I Thess. 5:16-18, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Notice, it is a matter of choice and not circumstances. You choose to be joyful, to pray, and to give thanks at all times. Entering God's rest in Christ is a choice to enjoy more and more fully what we have in Him.

Pink writes of the meaning of the word rest here: "The Greek word expresses something more than rest, or a mere relaxation from toil; it denotes refreshment likewise. A person weary with long bearing a heavy burden will need not only to have it removed, but likewise he wants food and refreshment to restore his spirits and to repair his wasted strength. Such is the rest of the Gospel. It not only puts a period to our fruitless labor, but it affords a sweet reviving cordial."

We need to grasp that God wants His people to enjoy Him, and that only when we do are we strong believers. God enjoys His being and His life, and He desires that all His children do the same. In the great text of Neh. 8:10 we read, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some for those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength." There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, and we are to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, but the laughter and rejoicing should far outweigh the weeping for the

people of God, for it His will that they enter into His rest and experience enjoyment as their primary experience. That is why the Psalms are so filled with joy and gladness.

Psalm 5:11 says, "But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy." We will have joy for all eternity, but we are not to just be waiting for that experience, for we are to be tasting eternity all through time. Psalm 16:11 says, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at our right hand." Psalm 30:11 says, "You have turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy." Psalm 31:7 says, "I will be glad and rejoice in your love..." Psalm 40:16 says, "But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you..." Psalm 89:15-16 says, "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord. They rejoice in your name all the day long; they exult in your righteousness." Psalm 118:24 says, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 126:3 says, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." These are only a fraction of the verses that could be quoted that show God expects His people to enjoy His presence and salvation.

When we come to the New Testament we see that Jesus expected His followers to be people of joy. His very teaching was to impart His joy to them. He said in John 15:11, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." When we have grasped the fullness of who Jesus is and what He has done we have entered into the greatest rest, and our joy will be complete. Paul had fully entered the rest of Christ and that is why he could write, even from a prison cell, what he did in Phil.4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again; Rejoice!" When you can be always in a state of joy no matter what the circumstances, you have entered fully into the rest of God.

III. SECURITY

Insecurity is the reason believers cannot fully relax and enjoy what they have in Christ. Christians are no different than the Old Testament saints when it comes to insecurity and doubts. Christians are often filled with doubts and they do not feel secure at all. They doubt God cares for them, and they doubt that they are worthy of being cared for by God. The result is they do not enter into the rest that can be theirs in Christ. God wants His people to feel secure, and that is why He was constantly encouraging them and promising them they could be secure in Him.

The concept is expressed well in Deuteronomy 12:10, where Moses said, "But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety." In Exodus 33:14 God said to Moses, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." To enter God's rest was to put your trust in the promise of His presence. A child feels secure in the presence of its parents and that is what God wants His children to

always feel in His presence. That is why Jesus promised that He would never leave or forsake His disciples, but that He would be with them always. They could rest secure that even when they did not see Him, He was there in their midst caring and guiding. Dr. Charles Revis describes the rest of God as "an inner experience of peace which comes out of trusting and obeying God" rather than "restlessness as a result of distrusting God." When things did not work out as they expected and they ran into a crisis the Old Testament saints lost their confidence in God and became so insecure they lost all sense of God's presence and peace. Jesus made it clear that His people would have tribulation, but He said, "Be of good cheer for I have overcome the world." Jesus expected us to enter into the rest of feeling secure even if the world is falling apart and we are being tossed about in a raging storm. As J. Oswald Sanders says, "Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God." There may be all kinds of crazy things going on around us, but as we continue to stay close to Jesus He guards our hearts with His peace not allowing us to be shaken. Charles Orr wrote,

Oh! this is blessing, this is rest.
Into Thine arms, O God, I flee;
I hide me in Thy faithful breast,
And pour out all my soul to Thee.
There is a host dissuading me,
But all their voices far above
I hear Thy words, "Oh, taste and see
The comforts of a Savior's love";
And hushing every adverse sound,
Songs of defense my soul surround,
As if all saints encamped about
One trusting heart pursued by doubt.
O tenderness! O truth divine!
Lord, I am altogether Thine.
I have bowed down; I need not flee.
Peace, peace is mine, in trusting Thee.

The author of Hebrews is concerned that the Hebrew Christians are in the same boat as the Old Testament saints, and that the persecution that they face as believers is causing them to lose their security and their trust in Jesus. They are in danger of missing the rest He has promised because of this insecurity. He is urging them to enter into the rest of Christ by leaning heavily on His promises, and by claiming the reality of His presence in difficult times. When you do not have the security of knowing Jesus is always with you, then you will not be able to relax and enjoy the salvation and sanctification that He makes possible. You see how all of these things are intertwined so that you need them all. If you break the chain at any point all of the pearls drop off the chain, and you fail to enter the rest of God. This holds true for the last point also, for it is the key factor that makes all the others possible, and it is-

IV. TRUST

The security that enables us to relax and enjoy our salvation in the finished work of

Christ is based on our faith in Him, and faith is trust. It is believing and acting on that belief, and this is the essence of entering into the greatest rest that man can enter into, for it is establishing an absolute relationship to Jesus as Savior and Lord. When we fully trust Jesus and believe all that He is and all that He promised, then we have entered into God's rest to the maximum degree that can be experienced in time. The eternal rest will be an upgrade to the ultimate, but by trust we can experience the best in time. Without faith and trust we cannot please God it says in Heb. 11:6, and the opposite will then also be true that with faith we can please God, and when we please God we are fulfilling the purpose of our life, and that will give us a sense of security which leads us to relax and enjoy all that Jesus died to give us in terms of the abundant life. Trust becomes the doorway by which we enter into the greatest rest that man can experience.

The Old Testament saints did not please God at all. They refused to trust Him and obey His will to enter the land of promise, and the result is they never got a chance to experience the rest He had prepared for them. We can do the same foolish thing now and miss the rest that is provided for us in Christ. That is why Hebrews is so full of warnings, for lack of faith and trust in God can lead believers to miss out on all that can be theirs in terms of experiencing the greatest rest. If we will put our full trust in Jesus He will be our Joshua who will lead us to victory over all the enemies of our souls, and lead us into the promised land of peace, joy and security where we can experience all the benefits of His rest.

Ron Wallace has written this on what he calls faith-rest. "Faith-rest is the attitude and practice of being totally relaxed and confident in the character and plan of God based on knowledge and trust in His word. It is not the normal Christian life to be worried and upset about any of the many pressures and adversities we face in the world. Paul sums up the reality of faith-rest in the promise stated at Philippians 4:6-7, "Be worrying about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all thinking, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

God promised to feed His people with manna each day, and told them to trust Him and not pick up more than what was needed for the day. Some did not trust God to provide for the next day and they picked up enough for tomorrow too. The result was that the manna spoiled and became rotted and worthless. Trusting God is obeying Him and then just relaxing and not worrying about future provision. Trusting is living in a way that demonstrates your trust in God. If you are always worried and in a state of anxiety, you are not entering God's rest at all, but are just like the Old Testament saints that missed His rest. Trust is defined in Webster's New College Dictionary as "total confidence in the integrity, ability, and good character of another." May God grant that we will have this kind of trust in God so that we can enter fully into His rest in Christ.

CONCLUSION

Notice the paradox in verse 11 where we read, "Let us make every effort to enter that

rest, [it's our choice, we can choose to enter God's rest, or we can walk away from it and experience the restlessness of being out of fellowship with God] so that no one will fall by following their example [that is, Israel's example] of disobedience." The paradox is that we are to relax and cease from our labor, and yet we are to work like mad and make every effort to enter this rest. Vine's dictionary says of this Greek word for rest, "Christ's rest is not a rest from work, but in work, not the rest of inactivity but of the harmonious working of all the faculties and affections-of will, heart, imagination, and conscience- because each has found in God the ideal sphere for its satisfaction and development."

What we see here is that we have a choice just like the Old Testament saints had. We can choose to give it our all to enter God's rest in Christ, or we can live in disobedience as they did and just drift along through life and miss God's rest and His best. Rest is a gift from God, but it is also a choice on our part to enter into it. Let us choose to enter in and be able to sing

I've anchored my soul in a haven of rest,
I'll sail the wide seas no more;
The tempest may sweep o'er the wild stormy deep,
In Jesus I'm safe evermore.

VIII. CHAPTER EIGHT. THE GREATEST CHANGER

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his close friend and partner Ralph Abernathy changed the course of history in America because of their leadership of the civil rights movement. The end result was that blacks could enter eating establishments, schools, buses, and a host of other places where they could not enter before. Ralph Abernathy said, "Bring on your tear gas, bring on your grenades, your new supplies of mace, your state troopers and even your national guards. But let the record show we ain't going to be turned around." The record does stand, and they did not turn back, but marched on to change the system. It was one of the greatest changes in history, but Abernathy does not give the credit to men, for he goes on to say, "Christians should be ready for a change because Jesus was the greatest changer in history."

That is a reality that we see stressed in the book of Hebrews. The civil rights movement opened the door for people to enter places they could never enter before, and that was a great change, but there is nothing in history to match what Jesus did in opening up a place to enter that could not be entered before. Our text reveals the most amazing change ever, for it says that those in Christ are now free to enter the Most Holy Place. This was the place most forbidden. This was the place that nobody could enter but the High Priest, and even he could only do so once a year, and even then only when he did all manner of things to prepare. The death of Jesus made it possible for this forbidden place, which was the very dwelling place of God, to become accessible to all believers. The masses can now

enter this place which was always off limits. Every Tom, Dick and Harry, and every Sue, Doris, and Mary from every race and color and nation can now enter into the very presence of God. This is the most radical and revolutionary change in the history of the relationship of God and man. Jesus made this change possible by shedding His blood for mankind, and this qualifies Him as the greatest changer in history.

There is an interesting web site called World Changers, which is devoted to educating Christians on how to become influences in the world that changes the world. Here is one of their statements: "Every faculty member at IWU is a committed Christian who has pledged to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the greatest World Changer of all time! You may have heard it before: Jesus never owed a home, never wrote a book, never commanded an army or led a nation, . . . He never even traveled more than about 50 miles from his home town, yet He has had more influence on the history of mankind than all other people combined. He accomplished this by showing just twelve other people how to become World Changers, and they in turn showed others. And they did it by their example as much as by their teachings. They didn't just talk the talk; they walked the walk."

One of the key ways that we walk the walk according to our text is by walking right into the Holy of Holies and communicating with God face to face. No longer do we need to depend on a representative to go to God for us. We can come into Him directly, and so we want to focus on the three things I see stressed in this 19th verse, which reads, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,..."

I. THE ATTITUDE-CONFIDENCE

We need not come with fear and trembling, which characterized the attitude of the Old Testament saints when they confronted the presence of God. When God spoke to them we are told that even Moses was terrified and trembled with fear. (Heb. 12:21). Imagine the Jewish people standing before the tabernacle and Monte Hall saying "Will you trade your freedom to enter curtain number one to enter curtain number two or three?" They would consider him a mad man and have him committed immediately, for the people could not make that choice. They were forbidden to even enter the holy place, let alone the Most Holy Place, called the Holy of Holies. To enter that place was equal to stepping into the inferno that was prepared for the three friends of Daniel. They survived by God's grace, and so did the High Priest, who came in once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people. But anyone else seeking to enter was signing his own death warrant.

This is absolutely amazing, for this is the greatest scandal imaginable to the Jews who had nothing but fear and terror at the very thought of anyone but the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies. It was suicide of the worst kind, for it was to provoke God to slay you in judgment. Nobody in their right mind would even dream of entering that holy place. It was forbidden on pain of death, and it would produce nightmares in any who

even gave it a thought. Nothing could be more shocking than to tell a Jew that you were going to enter the Most Holy Place. If you saw The Raiders of the Lost Ark you remember the judgment that came upon those who dared to look into the Ark. They were melted by the power of God's presence. But now we are told that we can come into God's presence without fear and trembling by the blood of Jesus.

There is no longer any place that is forbidden for all believes to come. The masses had to keep their distance in the past. The priests could go closer and enter the holy place, and the High Priest could once a year enter the Holy of Holies, but the masses were to stay far away from the presence of God. Now all are welcome to come near to God, for the temple veil was rent and the way made clear for all to come in to the Most Holy Place. It went from a place where only a rare exception was allowed for a human being to enter to a place open to everyone who puts their trust in Jesus as their High Priest. His death for us opened the way into the very presence of God so that now we can come to God as a child comes to its father. We can come without fear, but with assurance that we are loved and will be welcomed.

We would not have the nerve to try and walk up to the White House and try to walk into the office of the President. But if the President was our father we would have no problem doing so, for we would have privileges that are not available to those who are not in the family. So it is with God and His family. All God's children have freedom of access to Him. They can come to Him at any and all times, because God is never too busy for any of His children. The door may be closed to all who do not make an appointment to see the President, and have a good reason to take up his time, but there are no such limitations for those who are children of God. We can come to God with full assurance that we will be accepted. There are no FBI agents who will intervene and lead us away for questioning. There are no Seraphim with flaming swords keeping us from entering the garden of His presence. With complete confidence we can come into God's presence, for there is nothing to hold us back.

We may still be frightened by the fact that we are weak, sinful and finite beings, and God is the Awesome, Almighty, and All Pure Sovereign. That is why there is a stress on the body of Christ and on His manhood. We can feel at ease in coming into the presence of God because when we do we confront one who is like us. He is human as well as God. We are made in His image and when we see Jesus we will see one who is not frightening in His difference, but one that we will be comfortable with. He is glorious, and when John saw him in Rev. 1 he says that he fell at his feet as though dead. But he adds in verse 17 that Jesus placed his right hand on him and said do not be afraid. It is still somewhat frightening to come to God and to confront Christ face to face, for we are so unworthy, and He is so awesome, but He assures us that we can come and not be afraid, for we are welcome.

One of the most common words of Jesus to His disciples was that they should not be afraid. In Matt. 14:27 Jesus said to them as He came walking upon the water, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." On the Mount of Transfiguration they were terrified when God spoke, but Jesus came and touched them and said in Matt. 17:7, "Get up. Don't be afraid." When Jesus appeared to them in the upper room after His resurrection He said to them in Matt. 28:10, "Do not be afraid." When Jairus the synagogue ruler came

to Jesus to heal his daughter the message came that she was dead. Jesus said to him in Mark 5:36, "Don't be afraid; just believe." In Acts 18:9 we read, "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.'"

Spurgeon wrote, "At first we tremble in the divine presence; but as we feel more of the spirit of adoption we draw near with sacred delight, and feel so fully at home with our God that we sing with Moses, 'Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.' Do not live as if God were as far off from you as the east is from the west. Live not far below on the earth; but live on high, as if you were in heaven. In heaven You Will be with God; but on earth He will be with you: is there much difference? He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Jesus hath made us nigh by His precious blood. Try day by day to live in as great nearness to God, as the high priest felt when he stood for awhile within the secret of Jehovah's tabernacle." He points out that if we entering a strange house to which we were not invited, we would feel uneasy, but we are invited to enter the House of God, and so we can come with boldness.

What is obvious is that we are afraid to be in the presence of the supernatural, but that we do not have to be, and Jesus wants us not to be. It may take awhile to get past the initial shock of being in the same place with deity, but we can get past that and feel comfortable. That is the goal of God, that we feel free to enter His presence and commune with Him. It would take us awhile to get over the feelings of not being worthy even in the presence of the President or the King or Queen of England, but after they greeted us warmly and entered into conversation with us we would get over it and feel comfortable. God wants us to feel this way about coming into His presence. Don't be afraid, but come boldly before the throne of God as one who knows Him as Father. Come with confidence because it is the Son of God Himself who invites you, for He has made you, by faith in His blood, a part of the family. Jesus changed everything, and that is why He is the greatest changer in history.

II. THE ACTION-ENTER

It is not enough that we have the attitude of confidence to enter, for we can have the proper attitude and believe the door is open, and yet still not enter in. We must by an act of the will enter the presence of God. The author of Hebrews says in verse 22, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart..." This is not a truth that we just come to know and understand, but one that we must practice. We are not just to know it, but to do it. Draw near and enter in are not things to know, but things to do. "Let us" means to take action. Salad does not just happen to end up on your table. You have to make it, and that is what we see over and over in this passage. It is full of lettuce to make the salad of healthy Christian living in the presence of God. In v. 22 he writes, "Let us draw near.." In v23 he writes, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess." In v. 24 he writes, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." In v. 25 he

writes, "Let us not give up meeting together..." That is a lot of lettuce, and it means that we cannot just depend on good things to happen, we have to make them happen by action.

Spurgeon wrote, "Beloved, the Holy Spirit invites you to take into the holy place, and view it all with reverent eye for it is full of teaching to you. Understand the mystery of the mercy-seat, and of the ark of the covenant overlaid with gold, and of the pot of manna, and of the tables of stone, and of Aaron's rod that budded. Look, look boldly through Jesus Christ: but do not content yourself with looking! Hear what the text says: "Having boldness to enter in." Blessed be God if He has taught us this sweet way of no longer looking from afar, but of entering into the inmost shrine with confidence! "Boldness to enter in" is what we ought to have." And if we have that boldness then we are to use it to act and enter in.

What this means is that we can choose to be in the presence of God. He is always present to us, but we are not always present with Him in our minds and awareness. To enter in means practicing the presence of God. We do not have to do anything for God to be present, but we have to choose to be present with Him by entering into His presence. We have to choose to enter the Most Holy Place and commune with Him. This is an aspect of the Christian life that is so important for our security and maturity, but it is not an aspect that is promoted in our culture. The omnipresence of God is a theological truth, and it is just a fact of God's nature that He is ever present everywhere. But the manifest presence of God is a personal experience that can be had or not had depending on our will to act in coming into God's presence. Practicing the presence of God is our responsibility. God can choose to manifest Himself to individuals any time He chooses, but even in Scripture this was a rare thing. But we can choose to enter His presence by prayer and meditation; by worship and service, or just by focusing on the fact of His presence at all times. Practicing the presence of God means simply to choose to be aware of His presence with us in all that we do.

Most of us go many hours each day and never think of God, and never even try to be aware of His presence. The door is always open, but we do not choose to go in. We choose to focus on all kinds of things outside the Holy of Holies, and live a secular life until some other time of the day when we choose to slip into the room of the awareness of God. Only a few people in history have been successful in thinking of God hour by hour through the day, and so there is no need to feel guilty for not doing so, but the point is, the door is open, and we can, if we will, take the action that moves us into the presence of God at any time. We can go through a day thinking often of God. We can thank Him for every good thing that happens in a day, and we can pray for His guidance for every decision that we have to make in a day. The more we choose to do this the more we practice the presence of God, and the more we act in obedience to the wisdom of Hebrews.

There are many writings of the mystics that we ignore, but they deal with this whole issue of entering the presence of God, and of taking advantage of our privilege of being able to enter the Most Holy Place. Let me quote one such unfamiliar author:

Here are some thoughts from Poustinia by Catherine de Hueck Doherty:

"The Lord said that he and the father would come and make their dwelling with me. I don't have to go anywhere. This does not mean that you shouldn't render glory to God in church where everybody else comes to pray, but it means that you should pray constantly in your temple. There should be no break in our prayer. There is a Holy place in our heart. Why should my heart be removed from God while I am talking to you? When you are in love with someone, it seems that the face of the beloved is before you when you drive, when you type, when you are taking out insurance, and so on. Somehow or other we can encompass these two realities, the face of the beloved and whatever we happen to be doing.

My friends, prayer is like that. If you fall in love then it's impossible to separate life and breath from prayer. Prayer is simply union with God. Prayer does not need words. When people are in love they look at each other, look into each other's eyes, or a wife simply lies in the arms of her husband. Neither of them talks. When love reaches its apex it cannot be expressed anymore. It reaches that immense realm of silence where it pulsates and reaches proportions unknown to those who haven't entered into it. Such is the life of prayer with God. You enter into God and God enters into you, and the Union is constant."

Poustinia pgs 74-75

III. THE AUTHORITY-BLOOD OF JESUS

There is no human authority that has the power to open the door to the presence of God. No government has the key. No conglomerate has the key. No rich person has the key. No organization has the key. There is only one key that can get you into the presence of God, and that is the blood of Christ. It was while Jesus was shedding His blood that the curtain in the Temple was rent from the top to the bottom. It was His shed blood that opened the door for all to enter the Holy of Holies. God tore that dividing curtain apart to symbolize that He had accepted the atoning blood of Jesus as an adequate sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. Never again would there need to be another sacrifice. His was complete and all sufficient. The curtain could go, and the way could now stay open forever for all men to come to God by means of the blood of Christ.

Spurgeon wrote of this rent veil, "I want you to notice that this veil, when it was rent, was rent by God, not by man. It was not the act of an irreverent mob; it was not the midnight outrage of a set of profane priests: it was the act of God alone. Nobody

stood within the veil; and on the outer side of it stood the priests only fulfilling their ordinary vocation of offering sacrifice. It must have astounded them when they saw that holy place laid bare in a moment. How they fled, as they saw that massive veil divided without human hand in a second of time! Who rent it? Who but God Himself? If another had done it, there might have been a mistake about it, and the mistake might need to be remedied by replacing the curtain; but if the Lord has done it, it is done rightly, it is done finally, it is done irreversibly. It is God Himself who has laid sin on Christ, and in Christ has put that sin away. God Himself has opened the gate of heaven to believers, and cast up a highway along which the souls of men may travel to Himself. God Himself has set the ladder between earth and heaven. Come to Him now, ye humble ones. Behold, He sets before you an open door!" "The way is open, and you have boldness to enter; but not without the blood of Jesus. It would be an unholy boldness which would think of drawing near to God without the blood of the great Sacrifice. We have always to plead the atonement. As without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin, so without that blood there is no access to God."

When you trust in Jesus as your Savior, and believe that His shed blood cleanses from all sin, then you can come with confidence and boldness into the very Holy of Holies and speak to God as your heavenly Father. This is the greatest change in the history of God and man, and it can make the greatest change in your life to believe it and practice entering into God's presence by the authority of the blood of Jesus, the greatest changer. I am so impressed by this truth that I had to write a poem about it, with which I will conclude.

The holy of holies is a place we can go

When the blood of Christ for us does flow.

With confidence we can enter there

And know we can His presence share.

Of our faith, this is the center,

And with boldness we can enter,

For our Savior paid the price

When He gave His all in sacrifice.

It is the most sacred place of all,

But there's no curtain, door, or wall,

**We are free to enter in
Because Jesus died for all our sin.**

**Before Jesus we are told
None would ever be so bold.
For any who would dare to try
Would most certainly have to die.**

**But now the welcome mat is out
And we can know what God's about,
For we can come before Him now,
And in awesome adoration bow.**

**Like a child comes to its father
With assurance he will bother
To listen and give heed to all we plead,
For we know He longs to meet our every need.**

**So with boldness let us move
Into this place where we can prove
Getting to God is no chore,
For His is always an open door.**

**"Welcome sinner, come on in"
Is the sign where we begin.
For the Father will now see us
Since we trust in His Son Jesus.**

**We can come into this holy place
And look upon His holy face;
Because we are now of that race
That exists because of His great grace.**

**Life is filled with so much mystery,
But this we know from history:
From the day He was born in a manger,
Jesus has been the greatest changer.**

IX CHAPTER NINE. THE GREATEST RUNNER

In 1968, the country of Tanzania selected John Stephen Akhwari to represent it in the Mexico City Olympics. Along the racecourse for the marathon, Akhwari stumbled and fell, severely injuring both his knee and ankle. By 7 p.m., a runner from Ethiopia had won the race, and all the other competitors had finished and been cared for. Just a few thousand spectators were left in the huge stadium when a police siren at the gate caught their attention. Limping through the gate came number 36, Akhwari, leg wrapped in a bloody bandage. Those present began to cheer as the courageous man completed the final lap of the race. Later, a reporter asked Akhwari the question on everyone's mind: "Why did you continue the race after you were so badly injured?" He replied: "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to begin a race; they sent me to finish the race."

Such was the spirit of Jesus. He came into this world, not just to start a race to reach the goal of providing salvation from sin, but to finish that race and make it to the cross where he would pay the price for man's redemption. Anyone can start a race, but the key to being a winner is to finish what you start. Adam and Eve had the best start ever, but they fell along the way and did not finish the race. Judas had a marvelous start, but he let himself get ensnared by Satan and dropped out a loser. This story is repeated over and over again, and many who start good end poorly, for they do not continue. They lack the one thing crucial for being a winner, and that is perseverance. Nobody can be a finisher without perseverance. The word means "to hang in there." It is a refusing to give up even when you want

to call it quits because of fatigue. This is a major theme of the book of Hebrews, and all of the Bible, because it is the only way to be a winner.

We are to look to Jesus, for he was the greatest finisher ever. He never gave up running for the sake of winning the race for our sake. He is not only the author, that is the beginner, of our faith, but he is the finisher of our faith. He was a finisher because he never gave up. Michael Lampkin puts it so eloquently:

**"They Pierce him in the side, But he Kept on running.
They Whip him with 39 stripes, But he Kept On running.
They Smote him with the palm on their hand, But he kept on running.
They said that he wasn't the Son of God, But he kept on running.
He Could have given up, But he kept Running.
He Could have Come Down From The Cross, But He Kept On Running."**

**"Yes My Brothers and My Sisters Don't Give Up, Just Stay In The Race.
Don't Give In, Just Stay In the Race.
Don't Throw In The Towel, Just Stay In The Race.
You May Fall By The Wayside But Just Stay In The Race.
So what if they Talk About You, Just Stay In The Race.
So what if Folk Misunderstand You, Just Stay In the Race.
You Might Be About To Lose Your Mind, But Just Stay In The Race.
You Might Feel Like You are By Your Self, But Just Stay In The Race."**

This is one of the key messages of the book of Hebrews. The Hebrew Christians were being strongly tempted to give up on following Jesus. The persecution was too much, and they could retreat back to Judaism and escape much of the suffering it was costing to follow Jesus. The constant plea of this book is don't do it. Don't give up on Jesus, for there is no better one to follow. There is only loss when you give up on Jesus. He is the best and the greatest in every possible way, and it is folly to give up on the best. Jesus is not only the Savior, but he is also the greatest example of running the race of life without giving up when the going got hard. "When the going gets tough the tough get going," fits Jesus perfectly. He was tough, and so all the power of Rome, and all the power of Judaism, and all the power of Satan combined could not get him to give up. He ran all the way to the goal line, and He said before he died, "It is finished."

It was no easy race Jesus had to run. He had obstacles all along the way. Satan offered him an easy out by just bowing to him, but he refused to take that option. Many forsook Him when the leaders of Israel began to oppose Him. Judas betrayed Him and Peter denied Him. His closest friends abandoned him just when he was most in need of encouragement. And finally, even His heavenly Father forsook Him as He

hung upon the cross. It was hell to be so forsaken, but Jesus did not give up. He went the distance and became the greatest runner and greatest winner in history, and His prize is an eternity of redeemed humanity to share in everlasting celebration.

It is good for us to remember this reality when we get angry and frustrated with God for not making life run smoother for us. We have all kinds of burdens and pressures that God will not take away. We do not escape sickness and death, and accidents happen to us as well. Prayers go unanswered and God seems distant and uncaring. It is easy to feel that God is our persecutor, and we are tempted at times to stop running the race. Why not just sit out for awhile and see if it makes any difference? We are putting God to the test, and we are not living by faith, but by sight. The point is, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and not on circumstances, for He is the one who never stopped running.

Jesus had many escape routes along the way. He could have bowed to Satan, He could have conformed to the scribes and Pharisees, He could have let his disciples fight and called ten thousand angels to rescue Him, He could have ascended back to heaven and forsaken the goal of the cross. Jesus had a way out, but He never took it, because He did not come into this world to start a race-He came to finish one. Thank God for this greatest runner in all of history, for His determination and persistence to reach the goal is why we have reason to rejoice always.

What was the goal that kept Jesus going, even through the hell of being forsaken by His Father, and when He had the choice of escape? It was says verse two, "...the joy set before Him..." It was the joy of what would be accomplished for all eternity by his perseverance and never giving up. He endured all the shame and pain of the cross because it was so temporal and passing in comparison with the eternal joy of having a redeemed humanity to fellowship with in the Father's house in heaven. In 2:10 we are told that the goal of the suffering Jesus endured was to bring many sons to glory. He was building an eternal family. Jesus was never an earthly father, but He will be the father of the largest family ever for all eternity. Joy kept Him going, and we need this eternal hope to keep going when the cost is high. Those who do not give up on Jesus, even when the cost is death, have to have a clear and abiding confidence in the promise of eternal joy at His right hand.

As the example of the perfect runner, Jesus is to be the focus for all our lives as we run the race. We are to keep our eyes on Him and not get distracted by the many things that Satan will bring to our attention to make us stumble and even fall. One of the key reasons for failure in the race is getting our eyes off Jesus and on to other runners. We get envious of those who are ahead of us, and those who seem to be blest with sleeker bodies that can run with less effort. Paul urged Christians not to play the comparison game, for it leads to putting on a lot of weight, and slows you down in the race. There is always someone who is a greater runner than you are, and if that becomes your focus, you will be an unhappy runner. Your envy will be like a weight

you carry, and you will lose energy and falter in your progress. Throw off all the weights that come from focusing on others with envy and jealousy. You would pity the runner who tried to carry his garbage can with him as he ran, and that is what you are doing when you carry the weight of envy as you run the Christian race. Get your eyes off others, and get them focused on Jesus.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and the only way to run straight in the Christian race is to keep your eyes on the coach at the goal line. A pastor illustrated the importance of this by telling this story: “Back in the days of plowing behind a mule, the farmer was trying to teach his son how to plow a straight furrow, “Just set your eyes on a goal on the far side of the field, and keep the mule going straight toward that goal, and when you get across the field you’ll have a straight furrow.” Well, the young son tried that. He picked out a big brown cow grazing on the other side of the field, but when he got across and looked back, he had a very crooked furrow. For the cow had wandered about in her grazing, and he had been following a moving goal.” The point is, we need a goal that does not shift. We need a solid rock and one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is only one who fits this description, and that is why we must keep our eyes on Jesus. Mark Copeland points out that we can glance at those faithful in Heb 11 as examples, but we are to gaze at Jesus, and keep our eyes on Him. He wrote this little outline of ways of looking:

- 1) If you want to be distressed -- look within**
- 2) If you want to be defeated -- look back**
- 3) If you want to be distracted -- look around**
- 4) If you want to be dismayed -- look ahead**
- 5) If you want to be delivered -- look up! - cf. Co 3:1-2**

The weight that is most likely to slow you down and even take you off the track is getting your eyes on things rather than Jesus. Judas took his eyes off Jesus and got them so focused on the thirty pieces of silver that he stopped running with Jesus completely. This is the sinister plot of Satan from the beginning. He got Adam and Eve to take their eyes off of God and His Word of guidance, and focus them on the forbidden fruit. It worked, and he succeeded in taking them out of the race by this clever distraction. That is the method he has used all through history. Forbidden fruit is anything that makes us take our eyes off Jesus and get them focused on it. Once we are no longer focused on Jesus He is no longer Lord of our life. Whatever, or whoever, has our focus and attention becomes our idol. We do not like to think that idolatry is a problem in our modern world, but the fact is, we have as many idols as people have ever had. They are not called gods, and we do not actually go to temples to

bow to them, but they become our God when they take our attention off from Jesus, and become the focus of our attention.

Jesus faced all of this as He ran the race. Satan offered Him power over all the nations if He would get His eyes off the plan of His Father and focus on what His life could become as a great ruler. He offered Him an opportunity to leap off the temple and become a popular hero with the crowd forever clamoring to exalt Him. He could have become and stayed as a national hero among His people. Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are. He had the temptation to settle down and marry a godly wife, and enjoy the best of this earth. He had the temptation to get rich and focus all of His energy on building an earthy empire. Power, position and possessions, that trinity of earthly success, had an appeal to Him, as it does to all people, but Jesus had to lay these weights aside and surrender His life to the Father's will. "Not my will, but Thine be done." These were His words in Gethsemane, but you can count on it that this was a constant prayer of His life. Every day of His race He had to keep His focus on the goal and the Father's will, or there was danger that He would lose His momentum and stumble. His example of perseverance is to be our motivation to follow in His path.

**Jesus ran the perfect race;
Kept His eyes upon the goal;
And He never slowed the pace;
Gave His all, body and soul.**

**Let us fix our eyes on Him;
Let us never look away;
Never let His image dim;
Always let Him hear us say:**

**You are my great example,
Help me keep my eyes on you.
Help me all idols trample,
And to your goal be true.**

Jesus is the only perfect example. He was the perfecter of our faith. We have many heroes and heroines of the Bible, but they all had one thing in common, they were not perfect. The Bible does not hide their defects for good reason. They are valid examples of faith and perseverance, but they are not examples of perfect faith and perfect perseverance. That honor belongs to Jesus only. This means that there is even a danger in getting our eyes off of Jesus by focusing on other great examples. He was not a great example, but the greatest example, and when believers forget that they risk

taking on the weight of personality loyalty. The history of Christianity has been weighed down in the race to do the will of God by a focus on other people. The Corinthians had divisions in the church because some favored Paul, and others Apollos, and still others though Peter was the greatest leader.

This tendency to focus on men or women as the greatest leader to follow has hurt the church over and over again. The divisions of Christianity are primarily due to the focus on great leaders and teachers. The Calvin versus Arminius controversy has divided Christians for centuries, and probably will to the end of time. They see theology differently, but they see Jesus the same. They equally acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, but they do not have unity because that highest theology of His Lordship is not their focus. They put their stress on their different perspectives as to the sovereignty of God and the free will of man on a higher level than the Lordship of Jesus, and the result is they have a weight that slows down the whole church in the race to fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord. The eyes are not on Jesus, but on men and systems of theology, and the result is hindrances and entanglements that slow the pace. We do not have to stop debating issues, and stop seeking to reconcile the mysteries of godliness, but we do have to stop letting these things cloud our vision and take our focus off of Jesus. If you refuse to fellowship with and love another believer in Jesus because of some difference in theology, your theology is an idol, and you need to repent and submit anew to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I know it is a cliché, but it is true, that if Jesus is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all.

I know that the followers of men and systems feel very strongly about their convictions, but there is no way to escape the conclusion we must come to by reading the words of Paul in I Cor. 13:2, "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." You may be right that your theology is more valid and better supported by the Scriptures, but if that means more to you than loving your fellow believer, you have taken your eyes off Jesus, and you are running the Christian race with the weight of a large bag of theology books on your back. You might be more right, but you are making slow progress in being Christ-like. I trust my poem will be your experience as you seek to get back in the race fully focused on Jesus.

I took my eyes off Jesus,
And began to follow men.
I knew He came to free us,
And deliver from this den.

The devil got my focus
On so many other things,
And with his hocus-pocus

He caused his plan to take wings.

**Lord Jesus please forgive me
For taking my eyes off you.
Now it is so plain to see
That I must to you be true.**

**So get me back on the track
So I'm running beside you.
So then I will nothing lack,
As I too, your goal pursue.**

Jesus had to throw off entanglements of the world in order to become the greatest runner of the race of complete obedience to God. It was not easy to do so, and it is not easy for us to do it, and that is why we need to have His example ever before us. It is recorded that after the 1996 Olympic games in Australia there was a great upswing in business at the gyms and health clubs. The example of so many great athletes in such good shape motivated people to try and get in better shape themselves. This is the point of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. We are to look at all of these men and women of faith who persevered through all of their trials and kept running the race of faith. They now surround us and give us encouragement as we now carry the flame. But the example of Jesus stands out, for He is the gold medal winner of all time, and the greatest runner ever.

Jesus showed us by His example that a winner needs to deny himself many pleasures in order to be focused on the race. As we have seen, Jesus gave up all that a normal human life would have given Him. This is a price people pay even for the earthly race. Paul said it in I Cor. 9:25: “..everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.” Athletes have to give up a lot to discipline them selves and gain full self-control. Their victory depends on self-denial. They do it for mere earthly glory, and how much more should we do so for the eternal crown of God's favor? Jesus said in Matt. 16:24, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” If you are in the race with Jesus, you will need to deny and discipline yourself if you expect to keep up the pace of a winner. Jesus reached the ultimate goal and sat down at the right hand of God on His throne, and that is to be our goal as well. Jesus said to the church in Rev. 3:21, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” What a promise, and what a goal!

Steve Shepherd has put together an excellent outline of these first two verses of Heb. 12. He writes, "From our text in Hebrews 12 I would like for us to consider what will help or hinder our spiritual journey.

- 1- The witnesses who encompass us
- 2- The weights that encumber us
- 3- The weariness that encounters us
- 4- The winner who encourages us

This outline, that is a focus on the race, is by another pastor, whose name I have misplaced. It is an excellent summary of the message of Hebrews.

**Title: Why We Should Run the Race of Life With Confidence?
Hebrews 12:1-3**

I. We Should Run the Race With Confidence Because Others Who Have Proven It Can Be Done Are Cheering Us On! 12:1

II. We Should Run the Race With Confidence Because Jesus Has Already Run It On Our Behalf! 12:2

III. We Should Run the Race With Confidence Because Christ Provides Us With Both the Example and the Strength to Run On! 12:3

Our focus is to be on getting rid of everything that weighs us down, and giving our full attention to the example of the greatest runner and greatest winner in history. We read in verse 3, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." The point is, when you see what he endure for you without giving up, it will strengthen you to persevere even though there is great pain to endure to do so. There is no hint in the Bible that the race is easy. There is no promise that if you run the race with faith that there will be no pain. Just the opposite is the case, for, like Jesus, we will have to suffer much pain in discipline, and perseverance will mean pressing on even when the cost is persecution and even martyrdom. It may come as a shock when you see the Greek word for race, for it is the word *agona*, from which we get the word *agony*. The Christian race can be an agonizing and grueling experience that calls for great endurance and determination to keep going forward. This word *agona* was one of Paul's favorite words for the Christian struggle in the world. See (Philippians 1:30, Colossians 2:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7).

Arthur Pink has an excellent comment on the agony involved in the race. He writes, "The principal thoughts suggested by the figure of the "race" are rigorous self-denial and discipline, vigorous exertion, persevering endurance. The Christian life is not a thing of passive luxuriation, but of active "fighting the good fight of faith!" The Christian is not called to lie down on flowery beds of ease, but to run a race, and athletics are strenuous, demanding self-sacrifice, hard training, the putting forth of every ounce of energy

possessed. I am afraid that in this work-hating and pleasure-loving age, we do not keep this aspect of the truth sufficiently before us: we take things too placidly and lazily. The charge which God brought against Israel of old applies very largely to Christendom today: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1): to be "at ease" is the very opposite of "running the race."

If we expect to win the prize without pain we will be greatly disappointed when it comes. We do escape much of the pain that Christians have had to endure through the ages, and even yet today in parts of the world, but there is always the pain of self-denial and endurance that is essential to be a winner. It is one of the rules of the race that you have to be self-controlled. Paul wrote in II Tim. 2:5, "...if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victory crown unless he competes according to the rules." The main rule for the Christian race is to keep your eyes on Jesus. Someone told this story of those who tried to win by breaking the rules "I heard about a marathon runner that won the race far ahead of all others. Later it was discovered that a twin brother took over at the halfway point and ran the second half of the race with fresh legs and energy. They really didn't win because they didn't compete according to the rules." Neither do we win when we have a different coach and a different goal than Jesus. You might run a race that impresses others as you become popular and successful, but if your eyes are not on Jesus, and if you are not running to please Him, and reach the goal of being seated with Him on His throne, you are a loser no matter how many people are impressed.

In a world with so many distractions it is easy for any of us to get our eyes off Jesus and on to many other goals. It is hard to keep our focus on Jesus, and so much easier to aim for some goal that is attainable with less difficulty. We all want to go the way of least resistance. We are like Jack Handey who told of how a bully would demand his lunch money every day and he had to give it to him because he was so much bigger than he was. He started to take karate lessons, but the instructor wanted five dollars a less. It was cheaper to just go ahead and give his lunch money to the bully, and so he gave up karate." And so it is when we find it is easier to give in to the temptation of Satan to aim for earthly goals. They are so much easier than aiming for Christ-likeness that we give up this God-pleasing goal and go the way of the tempter. There is always more than one way to go in life, and that is why we need to keep our eyes on Jesus at all times, for as soon as we take them off of Him we risk taking a path that leads us out of the will of God. Robert Frost in The Road Not Taken gives us a picture of the importance of making sure we are taking the right road. We never are unless it is the way the Savior went.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could,
To where it bent in the undergrowth,

Then I took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The road less traveled is the road where self, others and things all become primary goals, and Jesus is just a footnote in the biography of your life. This happens to believers because they take their eyes off the coach and the goal. There is a false idea conveyed to many that the Christian life is only a fifty yard dash. You make a decision and pray for forgiveness, be baptized and join the church, and it is all over. You can then do your own thing, and just check in once in a while to let Jesus know you are on His side. Such are called "Mushroom Christians." They pop up quickly and then cease to grow. They never become a tree planted by the living water that brings forth fruit for the glory of God. They have never understood that the race is for life, and that it calls for endurance and perseverance. You can become a Christians in a minute, but it takes a life time to run until you are mature, and worthy to set down on the throne with Jesus.

We have no responsibility in being saved, for Jesus did it all, and we need only to accept what He did for us on the cross to be forgiven and saved. But notice how these verses are packed with personal obligation and responsibility. We must do things to be winners in the race of faith. We need to throw off those things that hinder us in the race. We need to run with perseverance. We need to fix our eyes on Jesus. These are not things that are done for us. These are things we must choose to do for ourselves or we will not be successful runners. Jesus is the greatest runner, but He does not run for us. We need to run the race ourselves. We look to Him for our example and our encouragement, but He will not do the race for us as we sit and watch from the bleachers. This is our race. He has already done His race, and He has done it for us to give us a reason to persevere no matter what the cost. He did not stop at any cost for our sake, and we are to do the same for His sake. There are no shortcuts and no substitutes. We must run according to the rules and be judged on our own performance. We cannot match the perfect run of Jesus, but we can be faithful to His path, and never wander away from the goal He, and all the faithful of the past, are cheering us on to reach. Salvation is not a prize, it is a gift, but the honor of being seated with Jesus on His throne is a prize that is won by running the race with perseverance, and never giving up.

A major point of the whole book of Hebrews is to look at the long run. The race is long and hard, and if you do not keep going just because it is not easy, you will miss out on God's best in both time and eternity. He wrote back in 6:11-12, "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." The bottom line is, we must be like Jesus in this race of faith. We cannot run it perfectly, but we can persevere and never give up. We must be ever, "pressing on toward the mark." This does not mean that we will never fall, but it does mean we will never stay fallen. "A righteous man falls seven times and rises again," says Prov24:16. The only way we can do this is to keep our eyes on Jesus the greatest runner. An unknown poet says it all:

**"Run the race therefore with patience.
Fill desperate hearts with a song.
Hope when the way seems quite hopeless
Endure when our strength is all gone.
Constantly onward our footsteps.
Eyes fixed on Heaven's delight.
Unending strength bears us upward,
Up to the City of Light."**

X. CHAPTER TEN. THE GREATEST RUNNER II

Races were one of the chief attractions of the ancient world. Large crowds would come together to watch athletes display their skills in running. The New Testament compares the Christian life to a race because many of the same virtues that made a great runner are essential for becoming a great Christian. Like a great runner, the Christian needs to discipline his body and his mind. He needs to prepare and practice, and he needs to learn to endure and persevere to the end. The Christian is running for the glory of God, and so it is important that he run well and give a good testimony for his sponsor. We are to do all that we do on the highest level of our capability, for we are to aim to win, and this calls for the full dedication of our lives.

We are expected to be winners. Paul wrote in I Cor. 9:24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." The word for run here, and in our text, and in 16 other places in the New Testament is the Greek word *trecho*. This was the word used to describe the greatest heroes of Greek culture, for they were the winners in the Olympics. They were the Greeks idea of the ideal of humanity. This word is used in the Greek Old Testament to describe the amazing run of Elijah in I Kings 18:46 where he outran the chariot of Ahab. It was a supernatural run. The verse says, "The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his

cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.” The word is used in the Old Testament for running in warfare, and to bring good news. In II Sam. 18:19 we read, “Now Ahimaaz son of Zadok said, let me run and take the news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies.”

Running played a role in the ministry of the Prophets, for they were to run with the message of God. It was a way of saying the message was important and urgent. Hab. 2:2 says, “Then the Lord replied: ‘Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.’” God wants His word to move fast and get to people in time. We read in Psalm 147:15, “He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.” It is God’s will that we run swiftly in obedience. Psalm 119:32 says, “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.” We are all to be runners for God, and this means prompt obedience and a sense of urgency to get His message to others. We are not just running to win a race for self-glory, but to make a difference in the lives of others by example, and by getting the Word of God to them. Running takes in the whole of what it means to live a life of obedience to God.

That is why Paul used the word *trecho* so often. Beside the I Cor. 9:24 quoted above, he also wrote in I Cor. 9:25-27, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” In Gal. 2:2 he wrote, “I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain.” Then in Gal. 5:7 he wrote, “You; were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”

He uses *trecho* again in writing to the Philippians in 2:16, “As you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on; the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” It is clear that Paul saw his whole ministry and life service as a race, and his goal was to run it well and be a winner. He expected all believers to do the same, and run the race with their eyes on Jesus. All of his letters were designed to encourage believers in the race. He joined the host of the faithful in Heb. 11 in cheering us on as we run. We need this encouragement for the race is hard, and there is always the temptation to give up and stop running.

Did Jesus need the encouragement of the crowd of witnesses? I am sure He did, for he had human emotions, and He needed the support of examples. He knew His Bible and how so many of the faithful of the past had to suffer greatly to be loyal to God. These Old Testament biographies had to mean a lot to Jesus. We sometimes think that because He was the Son of God He would not need resources to give comfort and encouragement. But this does not fit the facts of His humanity. He needed the comfort, not just of the angels, who had never endured the weaknesses of the flesh, but the

comfort of men and women of the flesh, who with all their weaknesses still kept faithful to God. They never gave up, and He needed those examples to cheer Him on in the race. If they could do it, so can I would be the normal way of thinking. Jesus was disappointed when the disciples did not watch with him when He prayed in Gethsemane, for He needed their support. He had the same need we all do to know we are cared for, and someone is cheering us on.

We seldom to never think about it, but Jesus needed the encouragement of the stories of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses, and the many others in Heb. 11. He knows we need them as well, and that is why they are recorded. Jesus is our greatest example, but we all know we cannot be just like Jesus, for He was without sin and fully obeyed God's will all His life. This greatest example of perfection can leave us feeling hopeless, for we cannot live up to it, but we can live up to the level of the many heroes of the past. They stumbled and fell and went off the track, and yet by persevering they still ran a good race. We can do that too.

Jesus is our greatest example, but He is more than that, for He is the coach who runs alongside as we run the race of life. When we fall or falter, He gives us encouragement, for He forgives and picks us up and gets us back on track. As long as we acknowledge Jesus as our coach we will never drop out of the race, for He will never let us, but will make whatever provision it takes to keep us going.

The word race is the Greek word *agona* from which we get agony. This is an important thing to take note of, for we tend to associate the word agony with defeat. The agony of defeat is a part of our language because of a famous sports program on television that portrayed the great blunders in sports that revealed just how painful defeat can be. But here we have the agony of victory. In other words, it is not only painful to fail in running the race, for even victory can be very painful. This is realism, for even the winner may have pains that last a long time, for it giving his all to win he pushes himself to the limit, and sometimes injures himself. Winning is not pain free, but can be very costly in pain. There is the thrill of victory, to be sure, but we dare not minimize the agony of victory, for it leads to the superficial view that if we are being successful in our run for Jesus we will not suffer. This false view leads many to drop out of the race when they experience great pain in being faithful in following the way of Christ. To avoid disillusionment we need to see that the race is *agona*, and this implies the potential of pain.

Kenneth Shaw tells of a race course he had to run. "Cross country runners race over various surfaces and terrain. Race courses are seldom flat, smooth, or straight, and they can be called anything but easy! I have one particular course in mind. It featured uneven ground, large steep hills, numerous curves, roots that might cause you to stumble, and its path was not clearly marked." Those who want to run and be winners without any pain are not being realistic. They are like the women in the Boston marathon. It was written of her, "She came across the finish line to cheers and puzzled faces. It was later found out, that this woman had taken a cab across town and then jumped on the marathon course ahead of all the other runners and then just trotted in the last mile or so to win the race. Of course, once this was discovered, she

was stripped of her prize and it was given to the woman who had really won, the woman who had followed the course as it had been laid out.” That is how the first verse here ends, “the race marked out for us.” In other words, we have a course that has been designed just for runners who desire to be winners for the glory of God. It is not a mystery that we have to figure out. It is not across a plain or desert, or through a jungle. It is a path that is clearly marked out so that we know the way and the goal. That is what the Bible is all about. It is the map we are to follow to stay on track and reach the goal God desires for us to reach.

Knowing the way and the goal does not make the race a snap, however, for it can be hard to stay on the track even when we know where it is. Satan puts clouds in front of us, or mirages that tempt us to go off from the proper way. It can often be uphill and exhausting to follow the right path. We might often be like the woman in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea. She came into the stadium limping and in great pain. She was exhausted and the officials could see she was experiencing fatigue as she became slower and slower. They asked her if she wanted help and she waved them off because she did not want to jeopardize her chance to finish the race. She was in agony, but she persevered to the end and came across the finish line on her own. The crowd roared in cheering approval for one so determined to run with agony in order to be a winner. I think it is safe to say that nobody can ever be a winner who does not experience some agony in running persistently the race for the prize of God’s best in Christ.

Part of the agony of being a winner is what you have to give up just to be an effective runner. You have to give up all that hinders you in running. This is agony because we love some of the weights that we carry that slow us down. Those who want to be winners do not carry extra weight anywhere to impede their progress. They wear clothing with the least wind resistance, and some even shave their heads to reduce drag of any kind. In the ancient world they even ran naked to reduce all possible resistance of the wind. They literally threw off everything that hindered, and that is the goal of this text, for nothing is to be held on to that keeps us from running our best. You do not have to be a very deep thinker to see how agonizing this is, and that is why we seldom run with the highest efficiency. It is just too agonizing to give up all that hinders. It is hard enough to give up just most of what hinders.

It is of interest to note how the different analogies of the Christian life are paradoxical. When it is seen as a race it is the taking off of all that hinders, but when it is warfare that is the analogy, then it is a matter of putting on all the armor of God. We are to clothe ourselves with heavy equipment and take a shield to protect us from the fiery darts of the wicked one. In warfare we are to get loaded up with garments of protection. In running we are to take off everything we can in order to run swiftly. You do not see a naked soldier going into battle, but you do see naked runners, for swiftness in the name of the game, and not protection.

It is easier to throw off the many sins that we know are clearly a hindrance to the race. They are the conspicuous sins that make one clearly a part of the world scene. We can do a fairly good job of keeping these heavy weights off, but there are so many hidden sins that nobody can see that are much harder to cast off. The attitudes of envy and jealousy, and the feelings of lust and greed, and a host of such invisible sins cling to

us, and we have pleasure in them because they are invisible. Nobody knows the inner person, and so we can hide our secret sins. These hinder our race, however, and it becomes an agony to even bother to try and rid ourselves of them. It is not like trying to run in a snowmobile suit, which everyone could see is being a plain fool. We can cast that burden off with no problem, but getting rid of the negative feelings we have toward others can be so difficult that we choose to run with this burden rather than go through the pain of dealing with them and getting rid of them.

You will notice that the text calls for us to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. It does not say to pray for God to cast them off for you. It is a personal responsibility, and not one where we can pass the buck on to God or anyone else. We have to do the throwing off, for we alone know all the things that hinder us from being the best possible runner. God knows, but He is not going to do for you what you need to do for yourself. You are the runner and it is your responsibility to be in the best possible shape for the race. The text implies that we have the freedom to choose to do so. We can do what the text says to do. We can throw off all that hinders, and because we can, we will be held accountable for doing so. This is a process that never ends, for we never know when we will pick up some burden that is a hindrance. Someone may do something to us at any time that will lead us to resentment or bitter anger that slows us way down in the race. There is no end to the task of staying in shape to run swiftly in obedience to God. There is no once for all practice and exercise that makes us fit to run for the rest of our lives. We need to be in constant training to be in good shape.

Jesus is our role model, for He lived a human life in the midst of a sinful people with a perfect record of running at His best every day of His life. We cannot match His record, but His record is the one to strive for, and what this means is that even though Jesus has done all that is necessary for our salvation, and even though He has won the race and finished the work He came to do, we still need to run our own race. He finished and has been seated at the right hand of God, but we have a long way to go. The idea that because Jesus finished the work for our salvation that we now can be at ease and do nothing is not valid. It is true that we no longer need to do works of any kind to earn our salvation, for it is a gift, and nothing we do can add to the gift. It is freely given by grace and all we need to do is accept the gift. But there is more to the Christian life than salvation. There is also the matter of living a life pleasing to God in gratitude for His free gift of eternal life in Christ. Pleasing God calls for running a race as effectively as possible.

Chapter 11 shows that the witnesses that surround us from the past were people who ran with diligence and showed their faith to be real by their actions. Able offered the better sacrifice. Enoch walked with God and pleased Him. Noah built the ark. Abraham left his homeland and was willing to sacrifice his son. Moses gave up life in a royal palace to suffer with the people of God. Joseph built storage bins for the grain in Egypt. Rahab let the spies stay in her home at great risk. All of the faithful people who were heroes and heroines of the past were people who responded to God with obedient actions to back up their faith. They ran the race by giving up something of this world and never giving up on seeking the best of the world to come. That is what is expected

of all believers. We throw off all that hinders us by slowing us down in our pursuit of godly goals, and we keep our eyes on Jesus who pressed on over all obstacles to achieve the purpose of God. All that we do in perseverance is not to earn our salvation, but to say thank you Lord for the free gift. We run and labor in gratitude, for we want to, above all else, please our Savior who never gave up until He won the race that made it possible for Him to give us eternal life. The point is, we are involved in the whole process, and if we are to run well in a way that is pleasing to God, we must make every effort to do two things: We must cast off the weight, and we must concentrate on the winner.

I. CAST OFF THE WEIGHT

It is always a major mistake to assume that because sin can be forgiven that it is no longer a problem in the believers life. It is always a problem, and we must be ever aware of how it hinders our running an effective race. The primary reason why we are not winners every day is because of the sin that entangles us and trips us up. Every day we would make more progress in reaching goals that please God if not for the sin that hinders us. We are so used to lugging this sinful stuff around with us that we do not ever realize it as a hindrance. It is like putting on a few extra pounds. We do not even notice it, and so we do nothing to reduce it, and this goes on daily until a few ounces here and there adds up to being overweight and a hindrance to our health. The same thing happens in the realm of the spirit. We take on a little bitterness here, a little anger there, and a pound of lust and envy to boot, and before you know it we are trying to run a race pleasing to God with a flabby soul made fat by consuming the devil's food of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. These things can be so tasty to the flesh that we consume them not even aware that they are making us too out of shape to run with effectiveness in reaching godly goals. We are waddling instead of running, and we are not getting any cheers from the crowd of witnesses, and God is not impressed nor pleased.

Our consumption of worldliness makes us too tired to read the Bible and make some effort to befriend someone to touch them for Christ. We say we want to be more active in developing our spiritual life, but we do not have time to devote to it because we have become obsessed with consuming the things of the world. It all seems so innocent. It is like sneaking a candy bar after every meal. They are so small that it cannot have any over all impact is the way we think, and do not realize that it is adding ounces to our flesh every day. So we give our time to the reading of worldly literature and so have no time left to study the Word of God, and this adds weight to the soul that is hindered in running well the race for God. There are no ends to the ways that we feed the flesh of our inner man and make it too fat to run well. Everyone has their own diet of worldliness that hinders them from staying in good shape to run the race pleasing to God. We often are so involved in getting more stuff that we neglect the importance of getting rid of stuff. We all have limits and just as you cannot hold more in your hand when it is totally full, so you cannot add good stuff to your life if it is full

of mediocre stuff. Something has to go in order to add the things that make you a better runner.

The text does not get specific in naming the weights and hindrances because they vary with each of us. Some sins are no problem for us, but they drag others down and sideline them in the race, or slow them to a crawl. They in turn have no problem with the sins that hold us back. We tend to be most against the sins that we have no problem casting off. The ones we cling to are the ones that we baby along and do not want to treat with too much harshness. The rich young ruler let his riches keep him from getting in the race at all. Judas let the thirty pieces of silver stop him in his tracks and ended his race. Others were just too busy with life in getting married and in buying and selling and taking care of their property to enter the race. Whatever it is that impedes your progress in becoming Christlike is a weight that needs to be cast off.

Jesus is our greatest example here, for He did not fill His life with the things of the world. He had little in the way of worldly possessions, and often had no where to lay his head. He had no retirement plan and no place for his burial. He had to borrow almost everything he ever needed from friends, and this was the case even for his tomb. We know that for most of us, we cannot be like Jesus in this way, or to this extent, but, the fact is, we can give up and cast off so much that consumes our time and energy in order to be more Christlike in giving ourselves to prayer and the Word, and to serving the kingdom of God our time, talent and treasure. Jesus traveled light through His short life, and that is the challenge for all of us. The airlines now force you to travel light and only one carry on is allowed. We need to have some stuff, but if we are really going to take off in serving Jesus we need to cast off more of the things that hinder and travel light.

Jesus gave up almost all of what the typical young man of Israel would expect in life. He did it for the sake of ministering to mankind. He cast off the weight of the worldly life in order to run with great speed in doing the Father's will. Jesus had to cast off the opportunity of ruling the world, which the prince of this world offered him if he would bow down to him. Jesus gave up that role in history to become our Savior. He took the way of pain and death rather than the easy route of painless submission to Satan. He laid aside his power to make bread for his own personal pleasure and he laid aside the power to win people's affection by leaping from the temple. Jesus gave up the power to do the very things most men would do if they had that power. He cast everything aside that would hinder him running the race God had laid out for Him to run. He was persistent in sticking to the race track of God's purpose, and He was rewarded with the greatest honor ever bestowed on a man. He was seated on the right hand of God. Thank God for His perfect race. Let us also cast off more and more of all that hinders us from being like Him.

II CONCENTRATE ON THE WINNER

All of those mentioned in chapter 11 were winners, for they kept running even though they could not see the finish line, and even when they had to suffer greatly to be faithful to God's will and plan. Their biographies are written and preserved for us in God's Word so that we can have examples of people that are just like us who were able to run effectively. Paul wrote in Rom. 15:4 "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The great cloud of witnesses includes many more than just the more noble ones that are named, for there were many nameless faithful runners in the past who were just like us. They were sinners just like us with their strengths and weakness, and they had their falls and failures, but they kept running. Their examples help us to press on in our race and never give up. This is especially the case when we concentrate on the greatest winner of all, and the greatest runner of the race, which is the Lord Jesus.

Someone has pointed out that our whole being is involved in running well.

Racing involves the total person.

With our minds we focus on our support.

With our hands we cast off all that hinders.

With our feet we run with perseverance.

With our eyes we focus on the guide and goal.

We sometimes think it is unrealistic to take Jesus as our example, for He was the perfect and sinless Son of God, but the fact is, Peter, who lived with Jesus for those three years of His active ministry, and who saw his perfect and powerful life of love and miracles wrote to believers in I Pet. 2:21, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." Peter expected Christian people to follow the steps of Jesus and be willing to suffer in order to run the race effectively. Jesus paid the price necessary to run well, and we are expected to do the same. He is the winner we are to emulate. We are to do more than just admire his perfect race. We are to adjust our life so as to conform to His so that we can run a better race. We cannot be perfect, but we can follow in His steps and be always going in the same direction He was going. It is still success and it is still pleasing God even if we stumble and fall and look awkward as we run, for we are always moving in the direction that takes us closer to Christ. With our eye on the winner we are always winning. It is only when we take our eyes off of Jesus that we fail. Peter was walking on water and doing what no man other than Jesus has ever done before or since, but when he took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink. The only time we are ever sunk in life is when we cease to concentrate on the Winner and focus on the wind and waves and any other factor that clouds our vision of the greatest runner ever.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus,

And not on the things of time.

For when God looks down and sees us

Looking elsewhere is a crime.

**It's a sinful use of your eyes
To take your gaze off of Him.
Keep your focus on His great prize
Don't let its light ever dim.**

**He's the greatest runner ever,
Follow His steps every day,
And a loser you'll be never,
But a winner all the way.**

XI. CHAPTER 11. THE GREATEST INTERCESSOR

Abraham was the first great intercessor in the Bible. He had the audacity to plead with God to change His mind and not destroy the city of Sodom. It was the most successful prayer ever, for God agreed to his request 7 times as he talked God down from saving it for the sake of 50 righteous persons to just 10. He got seven yes answers in a row, and yet the paradox is that it was also a completely unanswered prayer, for there were not ten righteous people to save, and so the city was wiped out in judgment. It was great intercession, but it failed to achieve its purpose. So Abraham was a great intercessor, but he could not save the people by it.

Moses was the great intercessor that saved Israel in the desert when God was ready to destroy them. He was so earnest that he pleaded in Ex. 32:32, "But now, please forgive their sin-but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." God was impressed, but He could not let Moses pay for the sins of the people. He spared them for a time, but later they were judged for their sin and destroyed. He was truly great, but he could not atone for their sin. The Bible makes it clear, you can be a great intercessor and still fail, for there are limits to the power of prayer. Prayer can never persuade God to do what is evil, wrong, or folly. He will not be moved to do what is contrary to His wisdom and nature. And so successful intercessors must learn to live with failure, or unanswered prayer.

Because God will not answer many prayers, due to their being contrary to His wisdom, nature, and plan, many conclude that there is no point in praying. This is folly, for it is a rejection of all the Bible says about the purpose and power of prayer. Paul did not have every prayer answered, but he was a continual man of prayer and urged all believers to be such. He wrote,

"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men . . . For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our

Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:1, 3-4).

Paul knew that not everyone that you pray for will be saved, but it is God's will that you seek that goal. Everyone is to be a subject of prayer, for all are potentially children of God. There is no one that does not deserve to be on your prayer list. Intercession is to be a part of every believer's life if they hope to be pleasing to God. He cares for all, and Jesus died for all, and so all are to be prayed for by someone. You can have a ministry every day of your life by just praying for the people you work with and contact in every situation as you go through a day. Some Christians feel like they have no ministry, but this is to be blind to the reality that the ministry of intercession is with them all the time. Abraham and Moses did not have all their prayers answered, but they pleased God by trying and that is what made them great leaders. The ultimate goal in life is not to get prayer answered, but to please God, and those who do that will have more prayers answered than the average. Such was the case with Abraham and Moses, and many other great people of prayer.

The great sorrow of history is that there have often been times when there was no intercessor to stand in the gap and sinners had no hope of salvation. Ezekiel 22:30-31 says, "And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord God." It is scary to think that God makes us partners in deciding how history will play out. This means that by not being an intercessor we can let people become victims of judgment rather than the mercy of God. That is why we hear Samuel saying to the people of Israel in I Sam. 12:23, "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you." This is a sin we seldom think of, but we can be sinning against God by not praying for others. Never say there is nothing you can do, for you can always pray, and by so doing you please God, and you can play a major role in the salvation and preservation of others. It is a Christian duty to be an intercessor. An unknown poet wrote,

I Traveled on My Knees

Last night I took a journey
to a land across the sea,
I did not go by boat or plane,
I traveled on my knees.
I saw many people there in deep sin,
and I did not want to send my prayers in.
But Jesus said I should go and see,
how many I could win.
I said, "Jesus, I cannot go and work
with such as these."
He answered quickly, "Yes, you can by traveling on your knees."
He said, "You pray, I will meet the need.
You call and I will hear."

**So I knelt in prayer and felt at ease
as I traveled on my knees.
I said, "Yes, Lord. I know I can do the job,
and my desire is to please.
I will heed Your call,"
and I traveled on my knees.**

That being the case, that we are all responsible to pray for others, we can assume that Jesus would be a great intercessor, and this is what we find as we study the Word. We discover, and it should be no surprise, that Jesus is not just a great intercessor, but the greatest ever. This book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is a great many things. The following list was compiled by Dale Tooley of all the things Jesus is according to Hebrews.

**Heir of all things
The Creator
God's chief spokesperson of the New Covenant
The brightness of God's glory
The express image of God
The upholder of all things
Our sin purger
Possessor of the Inheritance
The Son of God
The first born of many brethren
God
King of a righteous kingdom
Possessor of the oil of gladness
The authority over His enemies
First demonstrator of the Gospel
The Son of Man
Crowned with glory and honour
Set over the works of God's hands
Author of our salvation
First cause of all things
Perfect
Bringer of many sons to glory
He who sanctifies
Our brother
The one we trust
The one to whom we belong
A partaker of flesh and blood
Destroyer of death & the Devil
Releaser of the fear of death
Releaser of lifetime bondage
The one who gives aid
Merciful
Faithful**

**High priest forever over the house of God
Atoner and bearer of our sins
Sufferer of temptation in the flesh
An aid to the tempted
Apostle and high priest of our confession
Faithful to God
Worthy of glory
The builder of the house of faith
Master of the house
The one who speaks to us
Giver of mercy and grace in time of need
Our forerunner
King of peace
Surety of a better Covenant
Saviour to the uttermost
Our intercessor
Holy
Undefiled
Higher than the heavens
Minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle
Obtainer of a more excellent ministry
Obtainer of eternal redemption
Our sacrifice
Doer of the Father's will
Seated at the right hand of the Father
Our perfecter
Remover of need for further offering for sin
Concentrator of the way into the holiest
Remover of an evil conscience
Author and finisher of our faith
Endurer of suffering and shame
The same yesterday today and forever
The Great Shepherd of the sheep
Completer of every good work in us to do His will.**

Every one of these is worthy of a message, but in this message we want to focus on Jesus as our intercessor, and discover why He is the greatest intercessor ever. Our text reveals He is the greatest because He is-

I. THE MOST PERFECT INTERCESSOR.

Scripture stresses the role of Jesus as intercessor more than we realize, and so lets look at the number of texts where we see this role emphasized. First we see the texts in Hebrews.

"Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which

cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Hebrews 4:14-15

"But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:24-25

"For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us:" Hebrews 9:24

Then we see Paul's stress on this subject:

"Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Romans 8:34

"For through him (Jesus) we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." Ephesians 2:18

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;" 1 Timothy 2:5

And then there is John:

"My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." 1 John 2:1-2

All of these texts combine to make it clear that Jesus has a very important ministry in heaven. He has not just been sitting on the right hand of God twiddling his fingers until we join Him in heaven. He has been active, and is ever active as our intercessor and advocate. This should not be surprising, for Jesus was our advocate when He walked this earth, and so why would He cease to be in heaven? In His great and longest prayer in John 17 we read in verse 20, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." This was His intercession on earth, and doubtless, it is still His intercession in heaven. Again, we see that even the intercession of Jesus is not always answered completely, for there is much division of His body, but it does not lead Jesus to cease to intercede, for there is also much success because of it.

Jesus prayed for all believers who would ever live in the future, and that is us. And now He ever lives to continue to intercede for all of us. This should be a great comfort, for there are times when we struggle alone with issues, and they may be too private to share with others and get them to pray for us, but this is never the case with Jesus. He knows our every need and struggle, and so we always have one who is praying for us to gain the victory. He prayed for Peter, and though Peter still fell in denying Jesus three times, he came back and became a powerful servant. Even Jesus praying for us does

not guarantee that life will always run smooth and that we will never fall and fail. It does guarantee that the way is always open for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God. As our Advocate, which is a lawyer, we have a certainty that we will win every case before the court of God, if we put our trust in Him and call upon Him to intercede on our behalf.

The good news is that He is the greatest intercessor because He is the perfect intercessor, for He has already paid the price for all of our sins, and so the Father will always accept His plea of guilty, but the penalty has already been paid. The High Priest would carry the blood of an animal into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the people, but our High Priest, the Lord Jesus, enters the presence of God with His own precious blood as the basis for atonement, and God will always honor the sacrifice of His own Son. Who could be a more perfect intercessor than one who has already paid for the crime? Plus, we read in John 11:41-42, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." Jesus then called for Lazarus to come out of the tomb and out he came. That gives us complete confidence to come to Jesus, for we know the Father always hears His prayer. You can find no more perfect intercessor than that. It motivates me to write poetry.

Jesus is our Intercessor,

**Who daily before God's throne,
Carries every faith professor
Whom He has claimed for His own.**

**He ever lives to intercede,
And this post He'll never leave.
This is our greatest hope, indeed,
It's in Him we do believe.**

**We come to God only through Him;
For there is no other way.
He's a light that will never dim,
But will guide both night and day.**

**We will praise His name forever,
He is the perfect High Priest.
For all time He will endeavor
To bring to our hearts great peace.**

He will plead to God for our sin

When we don't deserve to live.
He will plead His blood and thus win.
He will ever give and give.

You'll never go to court alone.
He'll be always by your side.
For all your sin He did atone,
And for you was crucified.

He intercedes for you on high,
By His grace you will prevail.
So daily come with sigh and cry
To this One who will not fail.

He is the greatest because He is always able to save those who come to God through Him. When you knock on His door He always opens to you. He knocks on our door and we sometimes do not want to let Him in, but He never keeps us out when we come to His door, for He is the door, and He promises that those who come to Him He will in no wise cast out. No one ever came to Jesus on earth and was rejected, and that holds true for all time. He is the only way to God, and there is no need for another way, for He always succeeds in getting us to God, and getting us reconciled to God. Secondly, He is the greatest intercessor because He is-

II. THE MOST PERMANENT INTERCESSOR.

The weakness of the Old Testament priesthood was that the priests, including the High Priest, always died and so there was no permanence to their intercession. They had to start all over again with a new intercessor. With Jesus as our High Priest we have perpetual continuity. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is never a sign on the door of heaven telling you that there is a new owner, or that they are in transition because of new management. His intercession is not like that of the Old Testament High Priest who only went into the presence of God once a year to intercede. Jesus is our perpetual and permanent intercessor who intercedes night and day, and He never faints or grows weary. Jesus interceded for Peter and Paul and all of the early believers, and then also for those in the second century and third and on through the Middle Ages, and into modern times, and He will be interceding for all believers now on the planet, and for all who will be born until history ends. The point is, He is once and for all. There is not constant change with the times and circumstance.

Jesus taught the need to be persistent in prayer, and we see the great prayer warriors of the Bible and history were men and women who were persistent, and who never gave up. Hannah prayed year after year for her child and finally got Samuel. Elijah prayed earnestly for three and a half years for there to be no rain on the land and he was heard. Paul urged believers to pray without ceasing. Jesus is the greatest example of this, for He never dies and so when all others cease to pray, He is still going strong, and He never gives up. He ever lives to intercede. It is no part time occupation for our Intercessor. It is permanent and perpetual employment on our behalf. He never stops praying for us, and expects that we will never stop praying for others as long as we live. And finally, He is the greatest because He is

III. THE MOST POWERFUL INTERCESSOR

Scripture declares that the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16). How much more would the effective, fervent prayer of a perfect and perpetually permanent man avail? Someone said that "Prayer moves the arm that moves the world." How much more true this is when the arm that moves the world is the one that is praying. Our text says He is able to save, and that implies that He has great power in His intercession. He has connections with the Judge, and He can assure that all who come to Him will experience success with God.

Great Advocate! Almighty Friend!
On Thee our humble hopes depend;
Our cause can never, never fail
For Thou dost plead and must prevail.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear why Jesus is the greatest intercessor, for he describes how Jesus has a partner in the business of interceding. The Holy Spirit is the divine partner, and He works within the believer as they pray with groanings which cannot be uttered. It is an inside job for the Spirit, while Jesus represents the believer before the throne of God. This partnership makes their intercession the most powerful that is possible. Paul writes, "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.... Who is He who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:26-27,34).

Jesus taught that where two or three are met in His name He will be present, and that where two agree in prayer it will be answered. When two agree it makes a big difference, and here are the two most powerful intercessors together. It is the most powerful team possible. And because it is so, we need to come boldly before the throne of grace and pray for Jesus to intercede on our behalf. It is a prayer for the greatest Prayer-er to pray for us. Janice Stewart gives us an example:

**My Great High Priest, My Savior and Lord
Help me today, I can't carry this load
My soul is weary, my mind is confused
But I know if you pray, from this burden I
will be loosed.
Guide me today, by your Spirit I pray
Keep me in your prayers throughout this day.**

We lack power in so many areas of life, and without a powerful intercessor we just cannot live an effective life for God. Jesus has all power in heaven and on earth, and He wants us to tap into that power by dependance upon Him as our intercessor. It was by His power that we were reconciled to God, and it was by His power that we were set free from the bondage to sin. It is also by His power that we will be able to live a life that is pleasing to God. We need a powerful intercessor to be backing us up at all times, however, for we are still weak in many areas and still able to fall off the path of the narrow way. Hebrews stresses that Jesus is able, and that He has the power to do for us, in us, and with us all that is necessary to live an effective Christian life. A check without a signature has no power to receive cash back at the bank, but with the right name on it there is power to produce the money needed. Our prayers are often like blank checks offered to the bank of heaven. They need the name of Jesus on them to be cashed. It is His name that makes the difference, and that is why we need Him to sign our prayers. We need Him to intercede on behalf of our prayers, and in that sense sign them, for His name has the power to get them cashed, or answered. We need His backing in every area of life, for He has the power to make the difference. We are often not able, but He is always able.

In 2:18 we read, "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." We have an intercessor who has had the experience of living a human life, and so He understands the pressures and the need for support.

In 2:14-15 we read, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil...and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." In Christ we can be set free from the fear of death.

In 7:25 we read, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." To save completely means that by his power we can overcome all obstacles and ever press on to be sanctified more and more and to become more like Jesus. In Him and His intercession ministry we can find the power to be all that we can be for the glory of God. That is why Jude could declare in Jude 24, "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."

In the light of these truths we need to be ever praying for Jesus to be ever praying for us. We need to have someone who is always praying us through, and it is not likely that there is anyone who is ever praying for us except Jesus. He prayed for Peter in his great trial and Peter was able to survive a fall that could have meant eternal disaster. Only a great intercessor could have done that for Peter, and this One who was his intercessor is also ours. Thank God for this constant ministry of Jesus, and be ever praising Him as our Greatest Intercessor.

