

The New Covenant (8:1-13)

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took a cup of wine, passed it to his disciples and said: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:27-28). With those words and that symbolic action, he borrowed the phrase used by Moses when he took the blood of an animal, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex 24:8). The contrast was deliberate. Moses used the blood of an animal; Jesus used wine as a symbol of his own blood. Moses spoke of the covenant of the law; Jesus alluded to the new covenant of grace. Moses spoke of God's words which provided for the partial covering of sins so God could remain with his people; Jesus promised the actual remission of sins so God could live within his people forever. It is that excellent new covenant which chapters 8-10 of Hebrews now expounds.

The Royal High Priest (8:1-6)

We have already seen that a covenant rests upon a priesthood, not the other way around. It is the priesthood that makes the covenant effective. Just as the old covenant of law could never be more effective than the priesthood it represented, so the new covenant of grace can never do more than the high priest from whom it flows. So, in 8:1-2, the writer turns his spotlight on the central figure again: *The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest.* He is not only a priest but a king, and he sits on the throne of universal authority. Doubtless, this refers again to Psalm 110. His priesthood is a royal one which gives him, as Jesus himself declared, "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). Furthermore, it is exercised not in a tabernacle or temple on earth, but in what might well be called the "control room" of the universe, the heavenly sanctuary, the true tabernacle. The mention of *a true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man* refers back to 3:5-6, where Christ as Son serves in a greater house than Moses served in. As we saw there, "we [believers] are his house" of which the tabernacle erected in the wilderness is but a picture or type. *True* is not used in contrast to something false, but means "original," in contrast to that which was a copy. Here the symbols of God's throne and a true sanctuary are combined to describe the supremacy of the new covenant over the old. Both symbols are located *in heaven* and identified in some way with Christ's house. These relationships will become clearer as the author moves into the next two chapters. Verses 3-6 declare again that the offering of gifts and sacrifices is essential to the work of a priest (5:1), but the sacrifice Jesus offered went far beyond anything being offered in the temple on earth. His was not that of a mere animal but of a living person as the writer has just declared in 7:27. Note that he ties the priestly ministry then going on in the temple with that

prescribed for the tabernacle of old, and speaks of both *as a copy and shadow of what is in heaven*. (24) Stress is laid on the instruction which God gave to Moses about building the tabernacle in the wilderness exactly to the pattern given him on Mount Sinai. This temporary tabernacle was only a copy of something eternal and central to all things, a heavenly tabernacle which Moses saw. In Revelation 8:3-5 and 11:19, this heavenly sanctuary appears again, but there it is called a temple. This lends justification to the view of many that the writer of Hebrews saw the temple in Jerusalem as the legitimate successor to the tabernacle in the wilderness. The tabernacle/temple passed away, as it was intended to do, but the truth it was meant to teach abides forever. That truth will be developed further in Hebrews 9, but here it introduces the extensive quote from Jeremiah 31 which describes the new arrangement for living which our great high priest both mediates and guarantees. It is called the new covenant. This new provision of God for his people is twice described in verse 6 as *superior (kreittosin, "better")*, because it is built on better promises. Those promises are listed by Jeremiah as threefold: an inner understanding of truth, an intimate relationship with God and an absolute forgiveness of all sins.

The Better Covenant (8:7-13)

The quotation itself is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. So important does the writer consider this that he partially quotes it again in 10:16-17. As he has done before (4:8; 7:11; 8:4), he argues from a logical consequence: *if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another*. Two things were found wrong with the covenant of the law. First, the people did not fulfill its conditions, despite their initial avowal to do so (Ex 24:3). Second, it was not sufficiently powerful to motivate them to obedience since it was not written on their minds or hearts (Calvin 1949:187). Israel's failure is reflected in the phrases *God found fault with the people and they did not remain faithful to my covenant*. This new covenant is declared to involve a different relationship between God and his people from that under the old covenant, precisely because the old covenant did not keep the people from failure and God had to turn away from them. Therefore, in verses 10-12, the gracious provisions of the new covenant are detailed. It must not be ignored that in both the original passage from Jeremiah and here, it is clearly stated that the new covenant is to be made *with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*. Both verse 8 and verse 10 refer to a time when this occurs. Since the two divisions of the kingdom (Israel-Judah) are distinguished, this is clearly a literal promise. Such a time will indeed come when the ancient divisions will be forgotten and Israel shall be one nation living in the land promised them. Ezekiel confirms this in Ezekiel 37:15-23. At that time, he states, God promises to cleanse them, and "they will be my people, and I will be their God," the very words used by Jeremiah as the main provision of the new

covenant. This, too, is the substance of Isaiah's awed prophecy:

Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children. (Is 66:8)

New Testament support for a time when Israel will be saved is found in Paul's words, paraphrasing Isaiah 59:20-21: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins" (Romans 11:26-27). Though the writer of Hebrews undoubtedly applies this new covenant to the church, those commentators who deny its future application to the nation of Israel ignore great areas of Old and New Testament prophecy. (25) The basis for applying this passage to the church, though it is not stated in Hebrews is Paul's declaration in Romans 15:4 that "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." And again, "These things happened to them [Israel] as examples [Gk: *typikos*, as 'types'] and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). But whatever or whenever the application, the terms of the new covenant are exciting. First, *I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts*. Every true Christian knows that when he or she was regenerated, a change occurred in their motivation. They found they wanted to do things they formerly did not want to do; for example, reading the Bible, or attending church, or praying and meditating. They found their reaction to evil in their own life was also different. What they once enjoyed without qualm, they began to be disturbed about and even to hate. They experienced at least something of the struggle which Paul so eloquently describes in Romans 7:15-19. This is the practical experience of the promise of the new covenant, to give a new and inner understanding of both good and evil. The laws of godly behavior are written on their hearts. The second provision is equally remarkable: *I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*. Every true Christian also knows the inner sense of belonging to God in a new way. God is no longer seen as a stern Judge, but a loving Father. Believers are no longer outside the community of faith as aliens or exiles. They are now members of a family. They discover that whenever other members of the family are met, they too know the Father just as they know him. This new intimacy with God and his children becomes the bedrock of emotional stability in the Christian's experience. Notice how John develops this in 1 John 2:9-14. The new covenant's third provision is: *I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*. This is, perhaps, the most difficult aspect for us to believe, for it forces us to do two difficult things: recognize that we do wicked things, and believe that God has

already made ample provision to set aside that wickedness and continue treating us as his beloved children. Any sin called to our attention by our conscience needs only to be acknowledged to be set aside. Provision for God to do so justly rests on the death of Christ on our behalf, not on our sense of regret or our promise to do better. As Paul states in Romans 8:31, God is always for us, he is never against us. He does not ignore iniquity in us, but is merciful toward us. When we acknowledge it, there is no reproach---or replay---from him! We can live with a daily sense of cleansing by the precious blood of Jesus. That will do wonders for our sense of guilt or inadequacy. The author's point in verse 13 is simply that when the new covenant takes effect, there no longer is any reason to rely upon the old one. This does not mean the law of Moses (the Ten Commandments) is done away with, for Jesus himself teaches that it will last as long as the heavens and the earth (Mt 5:18). [\(26\)](#) What these words in verse 13 mean is that the law's work is finished when men and women come to Christ. It could not make them perfect, but they have now come to One who can! Since the Aaronic priesthood under which the law was given has now been replaced by the Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus, there is no longer any need for the law to work its condemning work in a believer's life. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Awareness of sin is now the work of the indwelling Spirit, not to condemn, but to restore us, when we repent, to useful and fruitful service. Many commentators have pointed out that historically the phrase in verse 13 *what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear* may well point to an awareness on the author's part that the priesthood of Israel, the temple in which they served, and all the rituals and sacrifices of the law which they performed, were about to be ended by the overthrow of Jerusalem as Jesus had predicted. This seems to be additional evidence that the letter to the Hebrews predates A D. 70. In chapter 9, we will return to the tabernacle and its ritual that we may more clearly grasp the realities of the new covenant and the freedom it gives us to live in a pressure-filled, baffling and bewildered world by the power that flows from our high priest today.

The True Tabernacle (9:1-28)

In C. S. Lewis' well-known *Chronicles of Narnia*, he describes how several quite ordinary English children, while playing hide-and-seek enter a quite ordinary English wardrobe. Pressing deeper into the familiar garments, they suddenly find themselves in a strange and mysterious land. Some such phenomenon occurs to those who think deeply about what Scripture says about that humble structure of skins and panels called the tabernacle. At first, all is factual, measurable and straightforward. But as we press deeper the walls silently move back the commonplace begins to glow, and soon we find ourselves before the awesome throne of God in a heavenly temple, surrounded by myriads of worshipping

angels, and watching the ritual of redemption through wholly transformed eyes. This could well have been the experience of the apostle John which he records vividly in Revelation 4 and 5. Until A. D. 70, the rituals of the law were performed daily, weekly and yearly in the temple at Jerusalem. Yet the writer of Hebrews only obliquely refers to the temple. Rather, he centers his thought on the tabernacle which was set up by Moses in the wilderness according to the pattern shown him on Mount Sinai. As we have already noted, the writer sees the temple as a continuation of the tabernacle. That tabernacle was intended to hold such a central place in the life of Israel that Moses was warned not to deviate one iota from the pattern given him when he had it constructed. Everything about the building and its furniture was meant as a teaching tool by which supremely important truth could be conveyed.

The Furniture of the Tabernacle Described (9:1-5)

As the author points out in verses 1-10, the typology of the tabernacle has great meaning for believers today since it depicts the eternal verities which Moses saw and which were associated with the new covenant and its priesthood. If we wish to understand that new priesthood and covenant, we must carefully study the tabernacle, both its structure and its rituals. This teaching would be readily acceptable to the readers of this treatise who came from Jewish backgrounds. The writer builds on this knowledge to unfold the great advantages of the new ministry. The tabernacle had three main parts: an outer court, which was entered through a single gate and in which stood the brazen altar of sacrifice; the brass basin, or laver, used for the cleansing of the priests; and the skin-covered, rectangular building of the tabernacle proper. That building was divided into two rooms and separated by a curtain. The first room was called the Holy Place and contained the seven-branched lampstand (the Menorah), the table of showbread and the golden altar of incense. In verse 4, the writer places the altar of incense within the second room, the *Most Holy Place* (more literally in Hebrew idiom the "Holy of Holies"), because it was closely associated in worship with the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat. But the ark of the covenant actually stood alone behind the second curtain. In this Most Holy Place the ark of the covenant represented the dwelling place of God, visible in the Shekinah, or glowing light, which rested between the cherubim atop the mercy seat. Within the ark were Israel's most treasured possessions: the jar of manna which never spoiled (Ex 16:32); Aaron's staff which had sprouted and borne fruit when Aaron's priesthood had been challenged by the heads of the other tribes (Num 17:8-10); and the actual tables of the law which Moses had brought down from the mountain, written on by the finger of God (Ex 32:15). [\(27\)](#)

The Meaning of the Ritual (9:6-10)

Verses 6-7 remind readers that there was a special sanctity about the Most Holy Place and the ark of the covenant. No ordinary Israelite could ever enter the Holy Place where the Menorah, table of showbread and altar of incense stood, but the priests went in there daily to perform their ministrations. But even the priests could not enter the Most Holy Place and stand before the ark of the covenant. Only the high priest could do so, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). He must take with him a basin of blood from the goat which had been sacrificed on that day and sprinkle that blood on the mercy seat for his own sins and the sins of the people (Lev 16). The question which must come before us in reading this is, What did all this carefully prepared building, furniture and ritual represent? What was the reality of which all this was only a copy? Or, to put it most simply, What did Moses see on the holy mountain which he faithfully reproduced in a symbolic copy, the tabernacle? The answer to this is suggested by certain statements that follow, notably verses 8, 11, and 23-24. But the writer now states he does not want to be tied up with the details of the tabernacle's meaning but hastens to stress a most important point. The Levitical offerings had to be repeated continually---even the offering of the high priest on the Day of Atonement when he entered the Holy of Holies once a year. This endless repetition meant that nothing permanent was ever accomplished by the Aaronic priesthood. The central statement is verse 8 which declares what the Holy Spirit meant to say by this repeated sacrifice. Unfortunately, the verse is almost always badly translated. Most versions, like the NIV, take the last phrase as suggesting that while the tabernacle/temple was still existing, the way into the true sanctuary was not yet revealed. But that would be tantamount to saying that until A D. 70, when the temple would be destroyed, there was no way of understanding how the death of Jesus had opened a new and living way into the true sanctuary, the presence of God. If taken in this way, it would give no meaning at all to the rent veil at the time of the crucifixion and no hope that anyone, before A D. 70, had found salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus! A better translation makes it all clear. (28) The Greek phrase *eti tes prote skenes echouses stasin* should not be rendered, "while the first tabernacle is still standing," but "while the first tabernacle still has any standing!" That indicates the writer is saying that the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant were meant by the Holy Spirit to predict a perfect sacrifice that was yet to come, but it could not be apprehended while still relying on the old way of access to God! In other words, the truth of the reality could not be grasped while one was yet clinging to the shadows. The first tabernacle had to lose its standing before the reality it prefigured could be apprehended. This meaning is confirmed by the opening words of verse 9, *This is an illustration for the present time*. The old arrangement pictured the new, but the old proved ineffective, for it could not touch the inner, but only the outer, life. The veil that stood before the Most Holy Place constituted a barrier to the presence of God. All Israelites, who knew of that barrier, must have felt a continuing deep sense of personal uncleanness until the next year's Day of Atonement. Their

consciences would know no relief, for they must feel separated from God until the yearly sacrifice could be repeated. The tabernacle worship, with all the provisions of bread, incense, offerings---even the ornate building itself with its altars---was all a kind of religious play. It was meant to teach the people what was going on in their inner life and what was still needed to truly free them from sin's burden and give them unfettered and continuing access to the Living God. Their bodies could be rendered temporarily clean before God by the various ceremonial washings (v. 10), but their consciences remained defiled. Since they could find no heart-rest in the tabernacle ritual, they were being encouraged to look beyond the outward drama to what was important. But when Christ died and the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom God was saying: "The time has come; the way of access is fully open; the need for pictures is over." This has been the argument of Hebrews all along. To cling to the shadows of the past and not to move on to the clear light of the great reality in Christ is to put our whole eternal destiny at stake and, in fact, to be in danger of drifting into a total apostasy. Let the tabernacle and its ritual lose its standing in our eyes. Go on to the reality to which the Holy Spirit is pointing---the full forgiveness of sins of the new covenant and the resulting intimacy with God. Those who today try to earn a sense of being pleasing to God by good behavior need to hear this lesson. Never knowing when they have done enough, they feel troubled and restless without any heart-peace and thus are often driven to extreme measures of self-punishment and despair. They need to cease from their efforts and trust in Christ's completed work.

The Application to Christians (9:11-14)

The section from verses 11-14 confronts us anew with the question raised above, What is the reality of which the tabernacle was a copy? Verse 11 says it was a *greater and more perfect tabernacle . . . not man-made, . . . not a part of this creation*. Verse 24 adds, *he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence*. We have already been given a clue to the meaning of this in 3:6, "For Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. *And we are his house*." He dwells within us as he said he would (John 14:23) and as Paul affirms (Ephesians 3:16-17). The fact that this house is also termed heaven is difficult for us to grasp, since we tend to think of heaven spatially. It is "up there" or "out there" or even in some distant part of outer space. If we would eliminate spatial terms from our thinking, we could come to think of heaven as simply another dimension of existence, as another realm of invisible realities just beyond our senses---in other words, the spiritual kingdom in which God, angels and even demons, function. (29) What the Bible seeks to teach us, and what is difficult for us to apprehend, is that we too can function in this dimension. It is the dimension of our spirits. Thus, Paul can say, "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Jesus tells us, "God is spirit, and his worshipers

must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), and Paul adds, "He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17). All of this strongly suggests that what Moses saw on the mountain was the human person as we are meant to be, the dwelling place of God---the Holy of Holies. John tells us in Revelation, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." If that language sounds reminiscent of the promises of the new covenant described in Hebrews 8, it is no accident. God had this in mind from the very beginning, as David declares in Psalm 8: "You made him [human beings] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." These words, as we have seen, were quoted by the writer in 2:58 and to this, he appended: "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus . . ." Jesus, *as high priest of the good things that are already here*, has found a way to repossess the human spirit and cleanse it with the "better sacrifice" of himself (9:23), and to dwell within forever by means of the eternal Spirit (9:14). This view of the true tabernacle as the human person is also supported by Paul in his description of what awaits believers at death. "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1). Here the phrase "not built by human hands" is the same as that in Hebrews 9:11 translated "not man-made." It is clearly a reference to the resurrection of the body. This would also explain the phrase *not a part of this creation* in Hebrews. Our humanity was not created as glorified already. A glorified body is an additional step which Adam did not know in his earthly existence and which would, therefore, be "not of this creation." (30) The point our author makes in 9:11-14 is that if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer offered in the tabernacle of old sufficed to cleanse the sins of those ceremonially unclean and to forgive the rebellions of the past so that the people were temporarily acceptable to God, how much more does the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from sin's defilement today? They had only animals to offer in sacrifice, and it was necessary to repeat them again and again. But Christ offered only one sacrifice, not an animal but himself, and he did it *once for all*. This indicated its continuing, unbroken efficacy, which obtained not merely a temporary and outward cleansing, but *eternal redemption*. As we have seen, it is the conscience within which acts as a barrier to God's presence. Like Adam after the Fall, we tend to hide ourselves from God, fearing his judgment. Conscience cannot be rendered inactive by our will, though its voice can be muffled. It is only silenced when we see that God is not unhappy or angry with us. But since Jesus *offered himself unblemished* to God in our place, God's justice no longer makes demands upon us. We may, therefore, set aside useless rituals and so feel ourselves free in his presence to serve the Living God.

Jesus' Last Will and Testament (9:15-28)

The passage from 9:15 through 9:28 takes a slightly different slant. Though the same term *covenant* is used as in verses 1-14, it is now treated more as a bequest being administered by a living executor after the death of the will-maker. However, Christ is seen both as the will-maker who dies, and the executor who administers the estate, just as he was both the offering for sin and the high priest who offered it. The phrase *For this reason*, which introduces verse 15, looks back to the close of verse 14, *that we may serve the living God*. The promised Messiah administers the new covenant to *those who are called* in order that they may be equipped to serve the living and true God. That equipping capability of the new covenant is called *the promised eternal inheritance*. We have already seen that it consists of an inner understanding of the nature of both good and evil; an intimate, Father-child relationship with God; and a total and continuing forgiveness of sins. This is the inheritance which our Mediator offers to us whenever we come to the throne of grace (4:16) to receive it by faith. Just as the heir of a fortune may draw from its resources at any time, so we are expected to draw from this great bequest, as it is now available to us after the death of the testator. The last clause of verse 15 introduces the author's emphasis on the bequest, or *promised eternal inheritance*, flowing from the death of Jesus. Verses 16-17 argue that the covenant (viewed as a will) cannot take effect apart from the death of the will-maker. This principle is seen even in the first covenant (v. 18-22) since Moses, having read the law to the people, took the blood of animals and sprinkled the scroll of the law, the people and everything connected with the service of the tabernacle (Lev 8:10, 19, 30). He thus indicated that the old covenant was based upon death---the death of animals. Without such a death, even the limited forgiveness provided for in the first covenant could not take effect, for *without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*. A striking scene is described in Exodus 24:8 when Moses sprinkled the blood upon the people. It was meant to impress on them that sin cannot be set aside, even by a loving God, without a death occurring. His judicial sentence, "the soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezekiel 18:4), must be carried out. By sprinkling the blood of an animal on the people, Moses is saying that God would accept that substitution as a temporary reprieve until the true Substitute should come. The people must realize that sin is serious, since only death can relieve it. When the new covenant replaces the old, it not only removes sin through the death of Jesus but provides a new understanding and a new intimacy that make the service of God a delight and an enriching experience. By contrast, the author stresses again the value of the death of Jesus. Verses 23-26 speak of the blood of Jesus as an infinitely *better* sacrifice than the animal deaths that purified the *copies of the heavenly things* contained in the tabernacle. Though the imagery here is drawn from the Day of Atonement, we must not think of Jesus as bearing a basin of his own blood into heaven to present it before the throne of God at his ascension, as some commentators have concluded. The rending of the curtain in the temple at the time of the crucifixion is ample evidence to indicate that the blood shed in the death of Jesus was the moment when full atonement for sin was

accomplished. (31) The writer lays great stress on the contrast between the repeated offerings of the high priest in the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement and the one offering of Jesus upon the cross. Because of the infinitely superior nature of Christ's sacrifice, founded on his deity and sinless humanity, his one offering was enough for all time. He need not *suffer many times since the creation of the world to do away with sin*, but the one sacrifice of himself was sufficient. As we have already noted, the entrance, by faith, of Jesus into the spirit of a believer gives this person access to the heavenly reality which corresponds to the earthly Holy of Holies. That is where God now dwells (John 14:20, 23), and where our great high priest makes intercession for his own. He has no need to suffer and die again since his perfect sacrifice of himself completely satisfied every demand of divine justice. He can now sustain and support his people without any limitation on himself arising from their sins, since that has been settled forever in the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross. The phrase *the end of the ages* designates the present age as the last of a series. It marks the end of human history as we now know it and will terminate in the events which Jesus foretold would occur "at the end of the age" (Mt 24-25). Throughout this section the emphasis of the writer has been on the uniqueness of Christ's death. Again and again he has called it "once-for-all" (*hapax* or *ephapax*). That thought comes to the fore again in verses 27-28. Just as any fallen human being is destined to die once for all time, with judgment awaiting beyond death, so Christ also died once for all time to deal with sin. For the many who trust in him, it is not judgment that awaits beyond their personal death. This judgment has been forever removed by the sacrifice of Christ. Instead, they may confidently expect that he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. This salvation points to the resurrection of the body. For them, the spirit has been regenerated already and the soul is *being saved* as Christlikeness is formed in that believer (2 Corinthians 3:18). What yet awaits is the raising of the body so that the whole person becomes a dwelling place of God forever. This is the only place in the New Testament where the return of Christ is called a *second* coming. During his first coming, he dealt with the problem of human sin on the cross; at his second coming the full effect of that sacrifice will be manifested in the resurrection (or "transformation"--1 Corinthians 15:51-52) of the bodies of those who wait for him. In these closing verses of chapter 9, the writer returns briefly to the thought of 2:5-9 and his view of Jesus as God's ideal human being, who rules over the world to come. That view of the final triumph of Jesus will appear again at the end of chapter 10, as the author concludes his survey of the privileges and possibilities of the new covenant. As always, the thought of the return of Christ raises the question Peter asked in light of such events, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God" (2 Peter 3:12).

Let Us Go On! (10:1-39)

It would be foolish indeed to prefer reading a cookbook to eating a good meal when one is hungry. Not that there is anything wrong with reading a cookbook---it can be very enlightening---but it is not very nourishing! Yet some of the original readers of Hebrews were doing something very much like that. They preferred to content themselves with the externals of faith---such as the law, the Aaronic priesthood and animal offerings---and to ignore the fulfillment of these things in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They wanted the cookbook rather than the meal! As we have seen, the tabernacle in the wilderness, with its regulations and sacrifices, was an accurate and divinely drawn picture of the sacrifice of Jesus and the new arrangement for living which would be available to believers in Christ. But it could only describe these realities up to a point. It was both a comparison and a contrast. I carry a picture of my wife in my wallet and, when I am away from home, I find it comforting to look at it. But it is quite inadequate, for it is not my wife, only a picture of her. I can look at it, but I cannot have a conversation with it. I cannot laugh together with it, and I cannot persuade it to cook any meals! It is an accurate representation of the real thing, but also a far cry from it. So the law and the tabernacle could never do for believers of any age what the living Christ can do. This is the continuing argument of the writer in chapter 10.

A Willing Sacrifice (10:1-10)

A new aspect, however, is seen in chapter 10. The sacrifice of Jesus was one he came into the world prepared to make! It was no impulsive commitment on his part; he made it only after he had observed human misery. In verses 1-4, the author builds on a point he has made earlier---that the annual repetition of sacrifices in the old order indicated their inability to actually remove sins. Once again he uses a logical-deduction argument. Had they truly cleansed the conscience, there would have been no need to repeat them for the offerers; they would have seen themselves as cleansed from sin's defilement forever. But these sacrifices could not remove sin because they were based only on the death of animals. The annual repetition did remind offerers that they were still very much sinners and still very much in need of an adequate substitute if their sin was ever to be removed. The sacrifices were but *a shadow of the good things that are coming---not the realities themselves*. A shadow indicates a reality, but has no substance in itself. I waited on a downtown street corner one day for a friend who always wore a Western hat. Suddenly I saw his distinctive shadow on the sidewalk and knew that he was standing just around the corner. I could not actually see him, but I knew he was there. So the offerings witnessed to the person of Christ and his sacrifice, though they were not that reality themselves. They were but his shadow that indicated he was soon to appear. The *good things that are coming* are the equivalent of *make perfect* which the repeated sacrifice of the Day of Atonement

could never achieve. To *make perfect* a sinner before God would be to have sin and its effects totally removed. These include not only the effects on the spirit and soul but the body also---regeneration, full sanctification and resurrection. Though resurrection awaits the final coming of Christ, nevertheless, full and continuing access to God, "without the constant necessity of removing the barrier of freshly accumulated sin" (Bruce 1964:227), was available by faith to every believer in Jesus throughout the believer's lifetime (Romans 5:1-2). These animal deaths were unwilling, even unconscious, sacrifices of a lower and quite different nature and therefore inadequate substitutes for humans made in the image of God. *It is impossible, says the author, for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.* Isaiah had quoted God long before saying, "I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats" (Is 1:11). Nevertheless, despite this limitation, through the deaths of many animals, one unchanging message was being pounded out. Every sacrifice declared it and every offering told the same story. It was burned in blood and smoke into every listening heart. The essential point for a God-approved dealing with sin in one's life was that a life be laid down. Every dying animal meant a life brought to an end. Sin was serious; it forfeited life. Unless the sin could actually be removed, the sinner must die. To save the sinner from such a fate, an equal and willing substitute must be found. Such a substitute the author now finds described in the words of Psalm 40. Verses 5-7 quote Psalm 40:6-8 from the Septuagint. They describe, in words directly ascribed to Christ, his complete willingness to sacrifice himself to remove our sins. His was a self-giving life, not self-loving, as animal sacrifices were. Though there are different wordings here than the Hebrew text presents, nevertheless the central point is clear. Jesus saw himself described in the Suffering Servant passages of the Old Testament (*it is written about me in the scroll*), and willingly set himself to fulfilling that role in his incarnation (*Here I am....I have come to do your will O God*). Wholehearted obedience is the quality which God desires in sacrifices. He makes the point many times in the Old Testament, notably, in 1 Samuel 15:22; Isaiah 1:11-14; and Amos 5:21-22. As Morris rightly says, "God takes no delight in the routine performance of the ritual of sacrifice" (1983:91). Undoubtedly, he feels the same way about routine worship services today! (32) That none of his readers should miss this important point the writer takes pains to indicate clearly, in verses 8-10, the meaning of the quote from Psalm 40. He acknowledges that though God authorized the animal sacrifices of the past, he did not delight in them. Then he stresses the fact that Christ deliberately set himself to do the will of the Father, though he knew it would lead to pain and separation. Intimations of Gethsemane are certainly present in these words, though it was on the cross that they were fully carried out. Here the writer also declares that the death of Jesus, by fulfilling the will of the Father, completely replace the provision of animal deaths which had provided some degree of forgiveness before. Finally, he announces the only possible conclusion: it is by the fulfillment of the will of God in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ (note the double name, only here in Hebrews that we (all

believers) have been made holy. The Greek expression for *made holy*, indicates action with a lasting effect. We have been made holy by the death of Jesus, and we remain holy even though we struggle with daily weakness and sin. This should be borne in mind when we come to the statement in 12:14, "without holiness no one will see the Lord." It is holiness obtained by faith, not by self-righteous effort, and it is not lost by momentary failure. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" (Romans 8:1).

A Complete Sacrifice (10:11-18)

One peculiarity of the tabernacle was that it contained no chairs. The priests were not permitted to sit, but performed their ministries while standing. Our author maintains in verses 11-12 that this symbolically shows that their work was unfinished so their repeated sacrifices could not finally remove sins. But when Christ had offered himself as a sacrifice *for all time*, he sat down at God's right hand (1:3; 8:1; 12:2) for two excellent reasons (v. 13-14). First, there was nothing left for him to do except to await the outworking of the salvation he had accomplished on the cross. This would, of course, involve his mediation of the new covenant and his intercession for believers. No further sacrifice of any kind was required or needed. Enough had already been done to deal with every form of sin or rebellion. He could remain figuratively seated until his enemies had been totally rendered impotent (*made his footstool*---an allusion again to Ps 110:1). Second, his sacrifice was so efficacious that it guaranteed the fine perfection of all those who were *being made holy*. This involved not only the regeneration of the spirit and the salvation of the soul, but also, the resurrection of the body of each true believer. The little-understood term *sanctified* of the KJV has been properly replaced in the NIV by the words *being made holy*. It is both an accomplished fact (10:10) and a continuing process (10:14), a phenomenon found frequently in Scripture. We may not understand such a mystery, but we can revel in its reality, as the writer intends us to do. All progress in the spiritual life comes from personally apprehending a fact that is already true. To put it simply, we must see what we already *are* by God's grace, in order to manifest that fact by godly behavior. To show that such a condition completely fulfills the promises of the new covenant, the writer quotes again Jeremiah 31:33-34, introducing it with the words *The Holy Spirit also testifies . . .* This reveals once more his conviction that the prophets wrote by the inspiration and authority of God. Verse 16 highlights the new understanding of morality which regeneration gives (1 John 5:20); and verse 17 reminds us again of the wonder of total forgiveness of sins. This leads to the simple but conclusive statement of verse 18: where sins have been forgiven, no further sacrifice would do! The Aaronic priesthood; the tabernacle with its typology, its cleansing rituals and animal sacrifices; and the dietary limitations of Israel---all found completion in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus and his

Melchizedek priesthood. The new covenant is in force for all who truly believe. "The old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Privileges of Faith (10:19-25)

The result of the operation of the new covenant in believers' lives is a highly visible transformation of their behavior. It flows from an inward change of attitude which is not dependent on outward circumstances. Believers become highly motivated to live at a new level of behavior and need only a bit of guidance about the *form* that new behavior should take. This powerful new motivation and its legitimate expressions now concern our author. Twice in verses 19-31 the writer uses the phrase *we have*. Following these, there is thrice repeated the words *let us*. The *we have*s mark provision; *let us* indicates privilege. First, *we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place*. That "Most Holy Place" is the new life in the Spirit which the New Covenant provides ("I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit"---Is 57:15). As we have seen, it is that part of our humanity (the regenerated human spirit which puts us in touch with heaven) where God and humans meet. Through the death of Jesus a way has been opened for us so we may function as spiritual men and women. When Jesus' blood was shed on the cross, the veil before the Holy of Holies was supernaturally torn from top to bottom. That indicated that the way into the presence of God was now open to all who believe in Jesus. We can, therefore, enter with boldness and with no uncertainty as to our acceptance, since everything rests on the blood of Jesus. There is no doubt about our effectiveness, since we are now, to use Paul's helpful term, "co-laborers with God." When we work, he will work too, and when we bear witness, he will speak through us. (33) It would be difficult to overestimate the value of confidence in human motivation. It is the proffered goal of any number of special courses, weekend retreats, training classes and personal development programs today. Confidence training is the cry of the hour. In the first century, too, men clearly understood that a confident spirit was essential to success in any enterprise. But as the psalmist made abundantly clear,

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. (Ps 127:1)

By itself, human effort is doomed to ultimate failure. Only that jointly shared effort, when God works through expectant humanity, can be permanently successful. Confidence born of that conviction will always prevail. But believers have more than a confident spirit. They are also reminded that (2) we have *a great priest over the house of God*. All that the writer has said about the Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus is recalled here. Believers have not only a confident spirit, but

also a competent advocate. He is continually available, completely aware of our present situation, and vitally involved with us in working all things together for good. His great concern is the welfare of each member of the household of God, and "we are his house," as the writer has told us unmistakably in 3:6. Encouraged by these two powerful resources, a confident spirit and a competent advocate, believers are now exhorted to three specific activities. (1) *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart*. This "drawing near" must be the motive for all subsequent action. It includes more than formal prayer, since the present tense infers a continual drawing near. As the wick of a lamp continually draws oil for the light, so let us continually draw from God the strength and grace we need to function. This must be done (a) *sincerely*, without religious pretense; (b) *believingly*, in simple faith that God means what he says; (c) *without guilt*, having cleansed the conscience by reliance on the sprinkled blood of Jesus; and (d) *with integrity*, in line with our public profession of commitment to Christ expressed in our baptism. This continual drawing near to God is the great privilege of every believer in Jesus, in contrast to the remoteness of the old covenant which excluded everyone from the holy places except the priests. Even they could not enter except under the most stringent conditions. This "drawing near" is that "access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" which Paul describes in Romans 5:2. Again the writer exhorts, (2) *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful*. Here *profess* is seen as equivalent to "confess," for if we have drawn near to God, then surely the next logical step is to share the certainty of our hope with others. We can share our great expectation with confidence because *he who promised is faithful*. If those who hear us will act in faith as we have acted; they will experience the same blessing, for God is no respecter of persons. He will do as much for the man or woman next door as he has done for you; he will do as much for the janitor as he will do for the boss, and vice versa. We need not fear that God will let us down as his witnesses by showing favoritism to certain ones. He is faithful to keep his promise to anyone. Another privilege believers may exercise is summarized in verse 24, (3) *Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds*. The supportive love of Christians for one another is a powerful factor in maintaining spiritual vigor. It needs to be awakened in both ourselves and others. That does not envision finger-shaking and lecturing, but encouraging words and good example. Two suggestions are made to bring this about. First, *let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing*. Corporate worship is not an option for a Christian; it is a necessity. It certainly includes regular attendance at church meetings, but means more than that. It means a willingness to help struggling faith whenever Christians meet. The author had already noted the bad effects of neglecting this on the part of some (3:13). Perhaps those who were hardened felt themselves to be sufficient in themselves, needing no one's help. One commentator suggests that if the real reasons for such separation were recorded, they might be easily recognizable in the modern church (Wiley 1959:342). If church services grow dull or boring they need renewal, not

abandonment. The gathering of Christians should be an uplifting and exciting occasion. History has repeatedly shown that where this is neglected or permitted to dim, dullness and blandness soon follow. A second suggestion for spurring one another on is also given: *Let us encourage one another---and all the more as you see the Day approaching*. The destruction of the temple and of the city of Jerusalem was just around the corner. The empire seethed with unrest and premonitions of disaster. These frightening omens were not viewed as signs of God's inability to control his world, as many interpret similar events today. Rather, they were indications that God was working out his predicted purposes just as Jesus, the prophets and the apostles had foretold. No one could know the hour when "the Day" would begin, but its coming was certain and apparently imminent to them. (34) The Lord himself had instructed his disciples: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Lk 21:28). It is now apparent as we look back over the centuries that it has been the will of God to have each generation feel that it is living in the very last days of civilization. Each century has found the church fearing the cataclysms of its own time as the last to come. Yet, inexorably, each passing century has moved the world nearer the final end. This sense of imminence is God's device to keep believers expectant and full of hope in the midst of the world's darkness. Evil becomes more subtle in our own day, and the difference between truth and error more difficult to detect. The raucous voices of the age pour forth deceitful lies and society becomes permeated with false concepts widely viewed as truth. We too need to gather together to encourage each other and renew our hope by sturdy reaffirmations of the eternal truths of God's Word. We are a privileged people; privileged to draw near to the living God; privileged to speak out concerning our flaming hope; and privileged to stir one another up to love and good works. Carl F. H. Henry has well said, "Many Christians now live among neighbors who, swept by tides of immorality, fear herpes more than they fear Hades, and some even think God is a lofty synonym for gobbledygook" (Henry 1989:152). Every age of Christians has had to live in such a world, and today's Christians are no exception. They must take care, therefore, that their Christian witness is real, practically expressed and based on a thorough knowledge of who they are in Christ. Let no one take this lightly, for in the next section our author flashes a brilliant red light of warning.

A Fourth Warning Against Apostasy (10:26-31)

The writer includes himself ("we") as needing this warning also for it encompasses those who have received a full knowledge (*epignosis*) of the truth. It is directed to those who *deliberately keep on sinning* after they fully understand the way of escape in Jesus. It adds seriousness to the exhortation of verse 25 not to abandon meeting together with other Christians (as the initial Greek *gar*, "for," indicates).

This recalls John's warning in 1 John 2:19 concerning those who "went out from us." "Their going," he says, "showed that none of them belonged to us." They had known the way of life, but had not chosen to avail themselves of it, and one early sign of heart apostasy is an unwillingness to continue association with true believers. Yet despite the advantage of full enlightenment, if there is no change in behavior and sin continues to dominate the life of professed believers, they will find no other hiding place from God's wrath, for there is no other sacrifice than Christ's which will avail for sin. Since by unchanged behavior such individuals give evidence that Christ's sacrifice is rejected, the one way of escape is rejected also. Only judgment and "blazing fire" after death awaits, as one of the enemies of God (2 Thessalonians 1:7). This behavior parallels those "having fallen away" of 6:6, where apostasy also led to irremediable judgment. The NIV has properly translated the opening phrase of verse 26 as, *if we deliberately keep on sinning*. It is not a sin one can stumble into suddenly. It is not the normal falterings of a Christian still learning how to walk in the Spirit. It has been well termed "the leukemia of noncommitment." It is choosing to live for self behind a Christian veneer and refusing to be delivered from sin's reign by the past sacrifice and present high priestly ministry of Jesus. It is not continual sinning from ignorance as many church members manifest, but occurs after full enlightenment. Such people know of the power of Christ to deliver, but have not chosen to avail themselves of it. Their life may appear to be fairly respectable when judged by the world's standards, but what it is like in God's eyes is described in verses 28-30. (35) The argument proceeds from the less to the greater, very much as the writer had done in 2:2-3. If immediate death was the penalty for violating the law of Moses (which was but a shadow or picture), how much more should one expect severe judgment for continually repeating, knowingly and deliberately, the reality which is Jesus and his sacrifice! What they have done is threefold: 1. They have *trampled the Son of God underfoot!* The writer chooses a title for Jesus which emphasizes his right to be Lord over all. To trample him under foot is to spurn his right to govern life. Lip service is paid to Christian truth but life is lived as one pleases, even adopting the world's values and standards. As one poet has described it:

He lived for himself, and himself alone;
For himself, and none beside.
Just as if Jesus had never lived,
And as if he had never died!

2. They have treated as something common or trivial the blood of the covenant which has power to make one holy. They have regarded the blood of Jesus as having no more value than the blood of any other man, and therefore, in practice, insisted that religious activities ought to be enough to satisfy God. And they are saying this even though they have previously acknowledged that the death of Christ has ruled out such means. Once they regarded themselves as holy

(sanctified) by the blood of Jesus, but now they deny this and reject the cross as unnecessary for acceptance before God.³ They insult the Spirit of grace. The full understanding of redemptive truth, the awareness that the blood of Jesus can make one holy, the pleasures of meeting together with other Christians; all have been a gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit to the individuals considered here. Now these are being rejected and treated with contempt. It is an egregious insult to the One who was sent to draw men and women to salvation. It usually means to become guilty of the sin which Jesus called "an eternal sin," unpardonable in any age (Mk 3:29). Verse 30 supports this view of coming judgment with two references to the Song of Moses, found in Deuteronomy 32. The first refers to the destruction of apostates and is quoted also by Paul in Romans 12:20 in a possibly similar connection. The second quote, however, looks more to the severity of God on those of his own who presumptuously play with sin even when knowing better. Such a case is that of David in 2 Samuel 24, who is given a choice of three painful penalties because of his sin in numbering the people of Israel against the express prohibition of the Lord. If even a greatly beloved believer like David could be dealt with severely by God, how much more would the apostate feel the full extent of divine wrath! In either case, says our author in verse 31, *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*. To encounter the living God in the full majesty of his holiness is a terrifying and awesome experience. In the first case cited, it is to experience after death the eternal judgment of raging fire "that will consume the enemies of God." The second case is to know in this life the heavy hand of God's displeasure because of deliberate and sinful choices which one is reluctant to give up. Only God can tell the difference between these two cases, for in human eyes they may appear indistinguishable. But that is the purpose for such warnings as we find in Hebrews. As the writer has said: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart" (3:12), "Let us, therefore, be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short" (4:1), and "Let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall" (4:11). God is not a power to trifle with, for he can do what we cannot do, namely, read hearts. He can be ruthless if it is necessary to waken those sinners to the evil results they are embracing. That ruthlessness is a hidden blessing when the heart is unaware that it is ignoring the death of Jesus as the only adequate sacrifice for sin. Behind his severity is mercy toward those destroying themselves in unbelief. God lovingly seeks to waken them to what they are doing before they reach that stage of heart-hardening which deliberately reject Christ. Beyond that point lies the unpardonable sin.

Encouragement to Persevere (10:32-39)

Once again, as in chapter 6, we see the writer's confidence that most of those he addresses are not apostate, as he describes in verses 32-34. He seeks to recall them to the love and steadfastness they had exhibited when their faith in Jesus was new.

They had *received the light* as had also those now threatening apostasy, as verse 26 makes clear. But most had: (1) accepted *insult and persecution* to their own person, or supported others so treated; (2) visited and sustained those put in prison for their faith; and (3) actually felt joy over watching their property confiscated, since they took comfort in the fact that their true treasures were in heaven, not on earth. Such actions were the product of true faith, and he urges them to keep this confident faith in verses 35-36, since perseverance is the proof of reality. The persecutions and injustices they endured presented strong temptations to give up, to accept the values of society around, and to forget what they had learned about the realities of life, death and eternity. Many are tempted today to *throw away [their] confidence*. Confidence is what motivates appropriate action in view of the times in which one lives. Carl Henry captures the possibilities of the hour in which we now live: "All the modern gods are sick and dying. The nations that long lusted after power are now terrified by it. Sex has played itself out for many who thought an infinity of it would be heaven on earth. The almighty dollar is falling like a burned-out star. It is a day made-to-order for sons of the prophets, for sons of the apostles, for Protestant Reformers, and for evangelical giants" (Henry 1986:107). Times of danger especially call for renewed confidence, for confidence in Christ anchors the soul in times of pressure. To throw it away through doubt or neglect is to miss the incredibly rich reward that is waiting just around the corner. The coming of Christ is what God has promised (Acts 3:19-20) and for which faith waits (1 Thessalonians 1:10). *You need to persevere*, says the writer. Patience is a moment-by-moment quality, one which grows with practice. As the writer has already said, it is "through faith and patience" that we inherit what has been promised (6:12). The quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4 which appears in verses 37-38 is taken from the Septuagint version. (36) The author has made certain changes which adapt it to his specific purposes, without changing its basic thrust. Habakkuk speaks of a revelation which is coming; Hebrews changes it to a person. Since Jesus is both a person and God's last word to man (1:1), the change is appropriate. The main thrust of the quotation is for those who are made righteous by God. Faith will be the center around which all of life revolves. To shrink back from that is to reveal oneself as yet unrighteous and therefore not pleasing to God. The writer introduces this quotation with the words *For in just a very little while*. These words serve to underscore the emphasis in Scripture on prophetic fulfillment. It has been characteristic of days of decline in the church to lose sight of the hope of Christ's coming. Such weakening of hope invariably gives rise to programs for world betterment which lead Christians to forsake the biblical methods of God's working in society and to become involved in efforts to improve the world without the message of the cross of Christ. These causes become especially appealing when the passage of centuries dims the hope of the Second Coming. Scoffers arise, as Peter predicted, who would say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3-4). How can we align *in just a very little while*

with 2,000 years of waiting? Peter helps, of course, with his reminder that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." By that reckoning it has only been two days since Jesus left us with a promise to return. Further, as we have seen, it is a great mistake to project the limitations of time into eternity. These are two quite different things. Heaven, with all its implications of "absent from the body, present with the Lord" is fully experienced at the death of a believer, and thus the coming of the Lord is never any further away than one's personal death. We need to bear in mind our Lord's words to the persecuted church of Smyrna: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). In verse 39, the writer places himself in the picture again, but this time identified clearly with *those who believe and are saved*. The two groups he addresses throughout the letter are here placed in direct contrast. Some are "shrinking back" and are headed for destruction. Others, the majority he feels, continue to believe and thus experience the saving of their souls. This is exactly what Jesus had promised to persecuted saints in Luke 21:19: "By standing firm, you will gain life." This reference in Habakkuk to the faith by which the righteous shall live serves to introduce the last section of Hebrews with its brilliant focus on this operative word of the Christian life. Faith is the way we begin the life in Christ; faith is also the way it is maintained; and faith is what will bring us at last in triumph through the gates of glory into the very presence of the Lord himself. Chapters 11-13 provide a fitting climax to the letter, pursuing its themes with vivid pictures of faith in human lives.