

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 60*

### Hebrews – Part Five

#### Conclusion

#### Chapters 9 – 13

## I. BACKGROUND

As we finish Hebrews, we are reminded of the apparent purpose for the writing. The author targets those Christian Jews who are considering a return to practicing Judaism abandoning their Christian faith. In response to this consideration, the author re-explores the basis of Judaism and Christianity with the teaching that such a return would be a grave mistake.

Using the Old Testament as supporting scripture, the author explains that Christ was not merely an incident in the flow of Jewish history but rather the epic event to which all Jewish prophets and faith had pointed. Abandoning Christ for Judaism is a return to a faith that itself was then hollow and empty. Indeed, if the use of the faith was to forecast and hold people for a coming Messiah and covenant, then it was useless to return to the old system for it no longer had any meaning. There would not be another Messiah coming to fulfill the Jewish promises. There would be no more answers; the answers had already come. Christ could not be crucified again.

This week, we finish the letter considering Chapter 9–10:18, where the blood and sacrifice of Christ is set out as a superior offering to the temple worship and sacrifices of Judaism. We then look at the rest of chapter 10 and the call to persevere in Christ and his sacrifice. In chapter 11 through 13, we have the great challenge to live by faith with practical ramifications of that challenge and then concluding thoughts of the letter/sermon.<sup>1</sup>

## II. TEXT

### A. *Christ: the Superior Sacrifice (9 – 10:18)*

In the previous part of the writing, Christ was shown to be bringing a superior covenant to that of historical Judaism. This promised new and better covenant was one that Jeremiah had clearly foretold. This

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<sup>1</sup> As a reminder, there are serious scholastic debates about whether we are reading an actual letter or a written sermon of the early church.

covenant was a permanent and everlasting covenant. Now starting in Chapter 9, we read about how the worship and sacrifice of the new covenant greatly exceeds the efficacy and quality of the old.

Moses originally laid out the Old covenant worship in a moving tabernacle. We remember that the temple as the locus of worship did not come into Judaism until much later. But much like the temple, which the readers would have known, the Tabernacle was set out with a holy place and a holier place within the holy place. The holy place had its adornments and items for use. The holier place, called the “Holy of Holies,” contained the Ark of the Covenant along with a jar of manna, Aarons staff, the Ten Commandments, and an altar of incense. The priest would come into the Holy of Holies and approach the Ark of the Covenant once a year only after offering blood sacrificed for himself and the people.

The ark itself had the earthly accoutrements of God and his people enclosed. These were the commandments, manna, and staff referenced earlier. These were contained within the ark below the “atonement cover” or “mercy seat.” Then, above the mercy seat were the angels (cherubim) and beyond that the dwelling of God. While the writer does not dwell on the significance of this layout, he does emphasize that it was significant. For this layout was one of a covenant. As the Ark of the Covenant, this layout set up a working relationship between God and his people rooted in the covenant entered into on Mount Sinai.

For example, the atonement cover was a slab of pure gold which covered the items of the people (staff, manna, tablets) from the holy presence of God and his angels. This cover was where the priest would annually sprinkle blood for a sacrifice for the sins of the people. From inception of the covenant, the teaching was clear that a blood sacrifice was required to cover the sins of the people.

Because these sacrifices were annual, and because the priest (and only the High Priest) could enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, the readers should recognize that the sacrifices themselves were never really adequate for covering the sins of the people. If they had been sufficient, then the people could enjoy the presence of God themselves. But, all did not enjoy the presence. A year later, the High Priest would need to go through the ritual again.

In this light, we are to consider the sacrifice of Christ. Christ never had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins before entering before God. Christ himself was as pure as God and living before him righteously before Calvary. And so, Christ brought a sacrifice for the people that was pure and appropriate – a sacrifice that truly was justice for the sins of the people. Christ brought himself as the pure slab of gold that lay between the people and the holy presence of God. The blood of Christ brought forth a new covenant. A physical ark in a man built temple or tabernacle did not show the new covenant. The new covenant was a true and everlasting sacrifice that was laid between man and the real throne room of the Almighty. It brought a salvation once and for all to God's people (Chapter 9:1-28).

In the first 18 verses of chapter 10, the writer lays additional emphasis on the fact that old sacrifices obviously were not what God ultimately wanted or needed to satisfy eternal justice. If the old sacrifices had done so, then the sacrifices would not have to be repeated. In fact, you would not have seen the priests standing daily performing his ritual sacrifices for the people. These were sacrifices that were beyond the annual sacrifice in the Holy of Holies mentioned in chapter 9. The mere fact that the priest had daily duties offering sacrifices were indicators that the sacrifices themselves were of little use beyond symbolism and obedience.

Christ, on the other hand, was the real meaning of the symbolism behind daily sacrifices as well. As a priest, Christ offered a real sacrifice that lasts forever. Christ doesn't rise each day to perform duties of sacrifice like the Jewish priests. Christ did his work, sacrificed once for all, and then sat down at the right hand of God. This was the promise given by the prophets all along.

*B. Persevere (10:19-39)*

What does this mean for us? Several things:

1. We ourselves can draw near to God with clean consciences and souls, washed in the purist sacrifice possible.
2. We should never consider abdicating Jesus and our faith for any other life.
3. We should spend our energies with each other helping each other grow in a life style consistent with our faith and covenant. This includes meeting together at church and at other times.

4. We should shun sin and try to live holy lives, recognizing our sin was the reason we lived separated from God destined for eternal death absent the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf.

The readers were reminded how resolute they were in the earlier days of their Christian walk. In the midst of ridicule, insult, and persecution, they held onto Jesus as Messiah. Just because the promised second coming had not yet occurred was no cause to return to their Pre-Christ religious practices. They should recognize the faithfulness and patience of God and persevere.

C. *Live by Faith (11-13)*

Hebrews 11 is a chapter famous for its recounting of the pillars of Judaism as models of living by faith. It starts with a call to a life of faith. In a famous passage, it begins, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (11:1). This passage is used so often that we almost fail to remember the flow of thought that produced it!

The writer spent many chapters (and certainly the last concluding verses) exhorting the readers to understand that God’s failure to return, yet His failure to destroy the temple, his failure to do many things promised, was NOT a real failure. It was merely a matter of timing. God would not and could not lie. His promises were absolute. The occurrences were awaiting his time for fulfillment. They had not yet happened; but they would in time. This is the vein in which we read that faith is being sure of what we do not yet see. It applies to those promises mentioned earlier, but it applies also in the much bigger picture of life. It is here the writer pushes us to understand with repeated biblical examples.

Faith gives us understanding that the universe itself was a creation of God. Abel offered a better sacrifice by faith. Enoch left earth for God because of a deep faith that set him right before God. Noah had faith or never would have built the ark and survived the flood. Without his faith, Abraham never would have left Ur for the Promised Land. Similarly, it was faith that caused Abraham and Sarah to conceive and bear the father of the Jewish race at an impossibly late age. This same faith brought Abraham to a point where he even was willing to sacrifice Isaac, trusting that God would

raise Isaac from the dead before God would lie about a promise. Jacob lived and died by faith as well. Joseph and Moses, these famous stalwarts of Judaism, performed their history making deeds by faith in God. It was faith that dried the Red Sea and faith that brought down the walls of Jericho. Faith brought salvation to the spies in Rahab's house. And, the stories go on and on: Gideon, Samson, David, and others are famous and remembered for deeds done out of their faith in God.

Yet, the readers are admonished with a major point for understanding here. All these great names and peoples of Jewish history were never blessed with the truth of Jesus Christ and his atoning work. Their faith had working merit before God only because of the real sacrifice of Jesus that we now see with our eyes as a performed deed in history. Only together with us in Jesus are these Old Testament stalwarts "made perfect" (11:40).

We should understand that with this great cloud of witnesses, Abraham, Moses and others, comes a response on our part. As a runner in a race, we should take off and set aside anything that would hinder us from living/running a race as champions. We do not stop in the race and return to the starting line! We see Jesus at the end of the race and we fix our eyes on him. We live for him. We run to him. We do not get hindered and weary, we stay focused and finish what we have begun.

We see sin for what it is and we try to avoid it. We accept the discipline of children as we try to understand the ways of God and live accordingly. We try to live right before non-believers. We seek God's grace rather than the bitterness of human sulking and revenge. We live for more than physical pleasure, whether in food or sensuality.

Unlike the Jews with Moses at the inception of the Sinai covenant, we approach God himself. For the Jews, they could not set foot on the mountain where Moses ascended. The mountain trembled. There was smoke and fire. Moses himself trembled with fear. We have the mountain of God, Mt. Zion, which we now approach with joy. It is not a mountain of fear and gloom. It is a mountain of joyful assembly, a mountain where we join with thousands of angels in praise to our God. On this mountain, we rejoice and live by faith awaiting the finalization of God's history (12:1-28).

Here, we see why we live as we do: Why we are to love each other as family; why we are to treat strangers well (some may be entertaining angels without knowing it!); why should we feel the suffering ourselves when our Christian brothers and sisters suffer; why we should live faithfully with our spouses; why our pursuit should not be for money, but contentment; why we should pray for our leaders.

Our hearts should get strength from our faith in the sense that our body is strengthened by food. Jesus is unchanging; our lives should show consistency as well. We should always confess the name of Jesus as Messiah and praise God with our lips. We should live right, well equipped by the God who offered himself in sacrifice and resurrection power.

### **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. Jesus is our assurance that all is okay in the world.
2. We should live faithful lives trusting him.
3. Our lives should reflect our faith.