



SCRIPTURE  SHARED

Jesus: Greater Than

a study of Hebrews

Week 1: Superiority of Christ

An Introduction to Hebrews:

Anytime we study scripture, it's helpful for us to understand the context in which it was originally written. Who was the author? To whom was the author writing? Was the letter provoked by a specific situation or problem that needed to be solved, or was it sent as a general encouragement?

Ancient correspondence was written on scrolls, and it was common for the name of the addressee and the author on the *verso* side, which means "left" or "back" side, and for the actual content of the message to be on the *recto* side (the "right" or "front" side). For this reason, it is within the realm of possibility that as the letter was copied and shared among the early Christians, what was printed on the verso side was lost in the copying.

As such, there is no consensus among scholars about the author. There is not enough evidence to make a speculation with any degree of certainty. Origen, the 3rd century Christian theologian and ascetic, said, "the identity of the person who wrote Hebrews is known to God alone."

The letter was probably written between 65-70 CE. Clement of Rome quoted Hebrews in a letter he wrote to the Corinthians in 70 CE, which means that it was circulating around Rome by that time. Additionally, the way the author refers to the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system in present tense implies that the system was currently in use. When the temple was destroyed in 70 CE, temple sacrifices ceased. This means that the letter was written after most of Paul's letters, but before any of the gospels were written.

The letter is clearly written to Jewish Christians who were familiar with the temple, Torah, sacrificial system, and Hebrew prophets. The author makes reference to those things without offering explanatory notes; it's assumed that the reader will understand the comparisons and context.

In chapters 10 and 12, the author acknowledges the persecution that the Hebrews are experiencing. This letter is meant to be an encouragement to continue to follow Christ even in the midst of that persecution. The exhortations of the letter both reinforce that Jesus is superior to everything else, as well as warn the readers of the consequences of not staying faithful (there are six distinct warnings in the letter).

Day 1: Jesus is Better than the Prophets and Angels

Hebrews 1:1-2:18

Chapter 1

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

⁵ *For to which of the angels did God ever say,*

*"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you"?*

Or again,

*"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?*

⁶ *And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,*

"Let all God's angels worship him."

⁷ *Of the angels he says,*

*"He makes his angels winds,
and his servants flames of fire."*

⁸ *But of the Son he says,*

*"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.*

⁹ *You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;*

therefore God, your God, has anointed you

with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."

¹⁰ *And, "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth,*

and the heavens are the work of your hands;

¹¹ *they will perish, but you remain;*

they will all wear out like clothing;

¹² *like a cloak you will roll them up,*

and like clothing they will be changed.

But you are the same,

and your years will never end."

¹³ *But to which of the angels has he ever said,*

"Sit at my right hand

until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?

¹⁴ *Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*

Chapter 2

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ² For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, ³ how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, ⁴ while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

⁵ Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶ But someone has testified somewhere,
“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
⁷ You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
⁸ subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹ but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹ For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹² saying,
“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”
¹³ And again,
“I will put my trust in him.”
And again,
“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Understanding the Passage:

The story of God and us as told throughout scripture is that God wants to save us. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants so that they could be in relationship, then God appeared to Moses and gave the law to the Israelites in order to establish a relationship with them, then God spoke through the prophets, and finally, the fullness of God was revealed through the incarnation of God in Jesus. These efforts by God to be reconciled with creation are often referred to by theologians as salvation history.

The author of Hebrews uses the framework of salvation history in a systematic way throughout the letter to help the reader understand the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Chapter 1 compares Jesus to the angels. In the first century, the culture was permeated by Platonic dualism, which was the belief that the spiritual world (including angels) was holy, and the physical realm was unholy. There was confusion about whether Jesus, who was fully divine but also *fully human*, was superior to the angels since he was a part of the physical world.

The author of Hebrews sets the readers straight by using quotations from their holy text. There are eight distinct quotations from the Old Testament in the first chapter of Hebrews. Keep in mind that what we call the “Old Testament” would have simply been called the

“Bible” for those that were reading this letter. This text, especially the Psalms, which the writer of Hebrews quoted often, was familiar to the Jewish Christians to whom this epistle was written. It is the author’s intention to use recognizable imagery so that the readers can easily grasp the metaphors and comparisons.

- Hebrews 1:5 cites Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14
- Hebrews 1:6 cites Deuteronomy 32:43
- Hebrews 1:7 cites Psalm 104:4
- Hebrews 1:8 cites Psalm 45:6-7
- Hebrews 1:9 cites Isaiah 61:1,3
- Hebrews 1:10 cites Psalm 102:25-27
- Hebrews 1:13 cites Psalm 110:1

As mentioned in the introduction, there are six warnings throughout the letter meant to help the Hebrews stay faithful to Jesus in the midst of their doubt and persecution. The first comes at the beginning of chapter 2 in which the author reminds the people that they must pay attention to the gospel so they don’t drift away.

From the warning, the letter references the angels again in order to demonstrate that even though Jesus was below the angels “for a little while,” he is now crowned with glory (and superior to the angels) because of his death and resurrection.

Jesus is described as *archegos* in Hebrews 2:10. This is often translated as author, founder, captain, leader, or pioneer. The connotation of *archegos* is both of someone in a preeminent position (like a leader) as well as one who is the originator or founder of something. The image of a pioneer is especially compelling as a pioneer is one who goes where no one else has gone before with the intent of making a path for others to follow. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus makes a new path for his followers—one in which we get to share in his resurrection and glory.

But why did Jesus have to come as one that was lower than the angels (2:9)? Soren Kierkegaard, the renowned 19th century theologian, told a parable about a king who fell in love with one of his servants. He didn’t want his royal status to affect her response when he told her he loved her. He decided to move to the village near her, work as a carpenter, and wear peasants’ clothing. His hope was that they might meet naturally and that she would come to love him without him overpowering or dazzling her. He wanted her to respond freely to his love.

Jesus traded in his royal status to live in our village as a human so that we might come to know him, love him, and respond to his love freely.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Read Hebrews 2:1-4 again. Do you feel like you have ever drifted away from God by dismissing the message of the gospel?
2. Reflecting on the parable that Kierkegaard told, how would your reaction to God have been different if there was no incarnation and God tried to win your love through power and prestige?

Day 2: Jesus is Better than Moses

Hebrews 3:1-19

¹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ² was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also “was faithful in all God’s house.” ³ Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. ⁶ Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
“Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your ancestors put me to the test,
though they had seen my works ¹⁰ for forty years.

Therefore I was angry with that generation,
and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts,
and they have not known my ways.’

¹¹ As in my anger I swore,
‘They will not enter my rest.’”

¹² Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵ As it is said,
“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? ¹⁷ But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Understanding the Passage:

Does this seem out of order to anyone else? The author is trying to establish Jesus’ supremacy and is building up from the least comparable to most comparable... but wouldn’t angels be above Moses? After all, Moses was fully human, not divine at all. So why is the argument about Jesus’ superiority to Moses following the angels?

For first century Jews, Moses was basically god-like. Moses’ name is the third most often mentioned name in scripture (847 times, following only Jesus and David). Remember that Moses delivered the Israelites from slavery and captivity in Egypt, brought them together as a nation, and was the deliverer of the Law. The Law of Moses, or Torah, was the absolute guiding legal code for the Jews for the preceding 1,500 years.

In this section, the author touches on two ways in which Jesus is superior to Moses—his role and access to God. The author says that both Moses and Jesus were faithful to God; the

distinction is not marked by the level of faithfulness, but by the type of faithfulness. In verses 5-6, Moses was described as a servant in the house, but Jesus is described as a Son. A servant, especially a trusted one, would have access to almost all of their master's house, if not all of it, and may be put in charge of managing it. But the house does not, and never will, belong to the servant. Contrast that with a son who not only has access to the whole house but is the one who will inherit and assume ownership.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son wants to come back as a servant in his father's household, but his father chooses to put a ring on his finger. The ring is not just decoration—it allows the bearer to mark a wax seal on official documents as a signature, giving him the authority of his father's estate. As God's son, Jesus' authority was an exact copy of God's.

Until Jesus came, Moses was the only human with face-to-face access to God. Through Jesus, the limitation on direct access to God is gone! Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18. "All of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror."

It's important to note that the author is not trying to belittle or degenerate the Old Covenant or Moses. The argument that they are not sufficient is not an insult but is meant to elevate Jesus. This is not an anti-Jewish letter. The author quotes enough Hebrew Bible texts to show a deep respect and reverence for Judaism, but clearly sees Jesus as the ultimate revelation of and access to God.

The second of the six warnings is tucked into this passage as well. It is fitting that the section about Moses, who led the people when their hearts were hardened against God in the wilderness, contains the warning to the readers not to harden their hearts. The author offers three strategies in verses 12-14: (1) Do not allow your heart to harbor evil or unbelief. There is an old saying that you cannot prevent a bird from landing on your head, but you can prevent it from building a nest there. If you begin to feel that evil or doubt is taking over your thoughts, then you must address them immediately. (2) Exhort one another so that no one is deceived by sin. It's hard to call people on their sin and mistakes but letting someone linger in habits or practices that drive a wedge between them and God or between them and their Christian community is more painful. (3) Hold your confidence firm to the end. The Greek words in verse 14 for partner (*metochos*) and firm confidence (*bebaios*) imply a business relationship of good faith. Essentially, we have entered into that relationship with Jesus and are expected to wait until it comes to fruition, not leave at the first perceived sign of trouble.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you feel like you have direct access to God? Why or why not?
2. What difference does it make that we have access to God through the son rather than through a servant?
3. Does the framework of a business partnership of good faith give you motivation to hold fast when things are hard?

Day 3: True Rest

Hebrews 4:1-11

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

³ For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“As in my anger I swore,

“They shall not enter my rest,”

though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. ⁴ For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest.” ⁶ Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he sets a certain day—“today”—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. ⁹ So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; ¹⁰ for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

Understanding the Passage:

In the last chapter (3:19), the author notes that the Israelites wandering in the wilderness never received the rest of the Promised Land, and in this chapter, the author continues to talk about rest. Unlike the Israelites whose disbelief prevented them from receiving rest, the author is telling the readers that they still have a chance!

Not only does the promise remain available today but that it continues to be renewed. Rest was not “completed” through Joshua; if it were, the promise would be null and void. But, as the Message translation paraphrases it, it is a “live promise” that God is renewing, and God keeps setting the date for it as today. In his reflection on the concept of “today,” Frederick Buechner wrote, “If you waste it, it is your life that you’re wasting. If you look the other way, it may be the moment you’ve always been waiting for that you’re missing.” The author is exhorting the people not to waste their opportunity to receive God’s rest.

So, what is this rest? Is it a break from hard work? Is it a respite from worry or guilt? In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says that when we are yoked to him, we experience rest. We no longer labor to do it all or strive to achieve righteousness on our own.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Close your eyes and picture the most restful place you’ve ever experienced. What make it restful for you? How did you feel when you were there?
2. What do you imagine God’s rest feels like? What has kept you from experiencing it?
3. Do you feel yoked to God or are you trying to achieve righteousness by your own strength?

Day 4: Jesus, our Great High Priest, is Better than Aaron and Melchizedek

Hebrews 4:12-5:10, 7:1-28

Chapter 4

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Chapter 5

¹ Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,

today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,

according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Chapter 7

¹ This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him”; ² and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.” His name, in the first place, means “king of righteousness”; next he is also king of Salem, that is, “king of peace.” ³ Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

⁴ See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. ⁵ And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸ In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. ⁹ One might even say that Levi

himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³ Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

¹⁵ It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is attested of him, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸ There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

²⁰ This was confirmed with an oath; for others who became priests took their office without an oath, ²¹ but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever’”—

²² accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.

²³ Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; ²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶ For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Understanding the Passage:

By the first century when this letter was written, the tribe of Levi and the descendants of Aaron had been priests for at least 1,500 years. The Levites were the only ones that could serve as priests, and the Levitical priestly system was a given as the sole intermediary between the people and God. Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi—he belonged to the tribe of Judah—which means he would not have been eligible to become a priest. And yet the author of Hebrews is making the case that not only is Jesus a high priest, but he’s also the greatest high priest.

The priests that came before Jesus were mortal, and as such, they had to continually make sacrifices (v. 27 “day after day”) to atone for their sins in addition to the sins of their people. The one thing the priests did not do though was sacrifice themselves! We’ll talk

more in the coming weeks about Jesus as the perfect sacrifice, but it's worth noting here that Jesus' single sacrifice on the cross put an end to the need for constant sacrifices.

The scripture says the priests are subject to weakness, and the reality of a number of different priests is that they would be different. In the United Methodist church, our itinerant system means that pastors are not called to serve somewhere for their whole ministry; instead, they serve churches for a season and then go serve at another church. The benefit of this is that each pastor brings different inherent strengths and weaknesses with them, and hopefully all failings balance out! With Jesus, there is no need for someone to come behind him and compensate for his failings—there are none. He is the perfect priest who does not need to be replaced!

The other foregone result of their mortality is also death, which means there were many priests and that the work of each priest ended with their death. On the other hand, Jesus is able to save all of those who approach God as he always lives to make intercession for them (v. 25).

Read Leviticus and you will see how crucial the priests are to the covenant between God and the Israelites. The Israelites had to, with the help of the priests, perform sacrifices and rituals in order to become more holy. Jesus is described as the better priest, and the guarantee of a better covenant. The author of Hebrews isn't saying that the Levitical priesthood and the old covenant were bad, but instead that though they were good for the time, Jesus is better. He has "been made perfect forever."

These two pericopes about Moses and Aaron are important because they served different roles with the Israelites. Moses was a prophet, in effect an apostle, sent by God. Aaron was the high priest, which meant that he provided access to God. In Jesus, those roles are combined—Jesus is both sent by God and the access point to God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What does it mean for our assurance that Jesus is the priest forever?
2. Hebrews 7:26 list several attributes of Jesus. Which is your favorite? Why?
3. What do you learn about Jesus' prayer life from Hebrews 5:7? How might that impact your prayer life?

Day 5: Full Commitment to Jesus

Hebrews 5:11-6:20

¹¹ About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

Chapter 6

Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God,² instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.³ And we will do this, if God permits. ⁴ For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and

have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,⁶ and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.⁷ Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.⁸ But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.

⁹ Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.¹⁰ For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.¹¹ And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end,¹² so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

¹³ When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,¹⁴ saying, "I will surely bless you and multiply you."¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.¹⁶ Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.¹⁷ In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath,¹⁸ so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.¹⁹ We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Understanding the Passage:

This exhortation and warning is inserted in the midst of the passages about Jesus as the greatest high priest. The author is frustrated because his audience is not brand new to the faith, but they are spiritual babies. He says that they should be teachers by this point, which implies that they have had plenty of exposure to the teachings of Christ and probably to being in community with Christian leaders. The NRSV says that they have become dull in understanding (5:11), but other versions translate it as "too lazy to understand" or having "picked up a bad habit of not listening." And yet, it seems that they are still choosing to live on milk—easy teachings.

There is no "right" or "perfect" age at which to wean a child, but you don't see kindergarteners still attached to their mother's breasts! There is a time for nutrition that comes from milk, and there is a time for solid food. But unlike the unstoppable biological growth that occurs in humans, it is actually possible to stall spiritual growth. A person can get lazy and just stop moving forward in their faith journey, leaving them in the realm of spiritual infancy.

The danger of this laziness is that the gospel is no longer arousing and enticing—it becomes as dull as the hearer. Folks who grew up in the church often remark that they heard the stories of Jesus so much as children that they become a matter of routine rather than a cause for excitement. William Lane, a New Testament theologian, wrote that this apathy leads to "spiritual inertia and the erosion of faith and hope."

Those who have become dull in their understanding are culpable for this attitude and are ultimately the only ones that can rectify the situation. The issue is often rooted in a lack of

will, and so the Christ follower must be intentional and disciplined about finding their way back to faithfulness rather than just continuing to fall away. The lesson of Proverbs 13:4 is applicable here: “The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are the characteristics of spiritual maturity?
2. How does one become spiritually mature?
3. Do you consider yourself spiritually mature or immature? Why?

Video Questions:

1. Does it change how you read Hebrews to know that we don't know who wrote it or to whom it was written? Why or why not?
2. Who do you believe Jesus is? How did you come to that conclusion?
3. Take a few minutes and imagine how your life would look different if you were not able to approach God directly through Jesus (if we still had the priestly system). Share your reflections with the group.
4. Why is the connection between Jesus and Melchizedek important?
5. Are you surprised to hear the word of God described as a sword? Have you ever experienced that in your life? What was it like?
6. How successful have you been when you have tried to hide things from others, from God, or from yourself?
7. Of the three warnings discussed, which felt most relatable to you? Why?
8. How has your community of faith helped you in times of unbelief? Or how have you helped others in their times of doubt?
9. What are the things in your life that tempt you to fall away from your faith?

Prayer requests and other notes: