1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Hebrews (Part 1)
Theme: Superior

Overview: Hebrews says that any step away from Jesus is a step backward, because Jesus is superior to anyone and anything. This month, students will learn that Jesus is superior to the prophets and angels, superior to Moses, a superior sacrifice for sin, and the mediator of a superior covenant.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

Hebrews does not name its author. Parts of the letter sound like Paul, but other parts do not, and early Christians suggested Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, and others. The early church scholar Origen concluded that only God knows who wrote it. The writer knew Timothy (Hebrews 13:23) and received the gospel from those who heard the Lord (2:3).

Audience

The letter seems to have been written for Jewish Christians who knew the Old Testament well and were tempted to drift away from Christ and return to Judaism (Hebrews 2:1; 10:35-39). They had endured persecution in the past (10:32-34). The writer called his letter "my word of exhortation" (13:22).

Date

Hebrews likely was written before the destruction of the temple in AD 70, since the writer speaks of the priests and sacrifices as still continuing (Hebrews 10:1-2, 11). Many scholars date it in the 60s AD.

Setting

The readers lived in a world shaped by the Mosaic law, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. Some had grown weary and were in danger of shrinking back under pressure. The greeting from "those from Italy" (Hebrews 13:24) suggests a connection to Rome, either as the place of writing or the home of the readers.

Theme

Jesus is superior. Hebrews is the "better" Epistle: Jesus is better than the angels, greater than Moses, the perfect high priest, the once-for-all sacrifice, and the mediator of a better covenant. Because he is superior, believers must "fix [their] thoughts on Jesus" (Hebrews 3:1) and "hold firmly" to their hope in him (3:6).

Why Study Hebrews?

Hebrews calls believers to put their faith in the eternal Son, to hold firmly to their confidence and hope in Jesus, to trust in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice for their sin, and to "be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28).

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Hebrews 1:1–2:4

WEEK 2: Hebrews 3:1-6

WEEK 3: Hebrews 10:1-18

WEEK 4: Hebrews 12:14-29

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Put your faith in the eternal Son, to whom both prophets and angels testify.**

STUDY: Hebrews (Part 1)

THEME: Superior

LESSON TEXT: Hebrews 1:1–2:4

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 5:16-23; 10:22-39

JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO PROPHETS AND ANGELS

BY MARK SCOTT

Of the 21 Epistles in the New Testament, Hebrews is one of the most unique. We do not know who wrote it (parts sound like Paul, but other parts do not). We do not know to whom it was written (though it seems to have been for Jewish Christians). And we do not know when it was written (though it likely was prior to AD 70). Its importance, however, is not up for debate.

If Galatians and Colossians addressed a "Jesus-plus" type of faith, then Hebrews addressed a "minus-Jesus" type of faith. Hebrews says that any step away from Jesus is regression. The reason is simple: Jesus is superior to anyone and anything. Four lessons highlight this superiority.

Through the Prophets

Hebrews 1:1-3

God spoke through the prophets, but Jesus is superior to the prophets. The first four verses are one sentence in Greek, and that sentence is very involved. But the main idea is quite simple: God spoke. The God of the Bible is a speaking God. He communicates, and he did so *many times* (piece by piece) and in *various* (diverse) ways.

However, God spoke uniquely by his Son. This took place in real time and space (known as *last days*, which have been occurring since Pentecost—Acts 2:16-21). To emphasize how Jesus is superior to the prophets, the writer highlighted seven of his characteristics.

First, Jesus was *appointed* (placed) *heir of all things*. Second, he was involved in the creation of (i.e., *made*) the universe (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). Third, Jesus is the *radiance of God's glory* (splendor or light). Fourth, he is the *exact representation* (character, from a verb meaning "to cut") of his being. Fifth, he *sustains* (bears up) all things by his powerful word. Sixth, he provided *purification* for sins (cleansing). Finally, he *sat down* at God's right hand (Hebrews 10:12) to make intercession for us (Romans 8:34). Jesus the Messiah was a prophetic figure (Matthew 21:11), but his revelation to humankind was superior to that of the prophets.

Over the Angels

Hebrews 1:4-14

In the Dead Sea region of Israel, there had arisen a rather highly developed angelology. In addition to these verses, glimpses of this can be seen elsewhere in the New Testament (Galatians 1:8; Colossians 2:18). The writer of Hebrews respected the ministry of angels (1:6, 7, and 14). They worshipped God, served God, and were sent to those who would inherit salvation. But the angels cannot hold a heavenly candle to Jesus.

The writer clustered several passages from the Old Testament to bolster his case that Jesus was superior to angels (Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; Psalms 104:4; 45:6-7; 102:25-27; and 110:1). The angels did not occupy the place of the Son. They could not claim God as their Father. In fact, when the Father sent the Son into the world, the angels worshipped him—not the other way around. (The same will be true at the second coming.)

Angels are *fiery servants* (the real meaning of *seraphim*). But Jesus is divinely eternal. He was not like angels, which were created. In fact, Jesus' throne lasts forever, and his scepter of *justice* (straightness) will help him rule well. The Son loved righteousness and hated *wickedness* (lawlessness). No wonder the Father set him above his heavenly companions and *anointed* him (think Messiah) with joy.

The angels did not create anything; rather, they themselves were created. They did not lay the foundations of the earth, nor did they speak the heavens into existence. Creation is distinguished from its Creator. Creation will *perish* ("be loosed down") in the same way that a garment wears out or is changed, or in the same way a robe is rolled up. Jesus sits at the right hand of God—angels do not.

So . . . Pay Attention

Hebrews 2:1-4

This is the first warning in the Epistle against returning to Judaism instead of clinging to Christ (additional warnings occur in Hebrews 3:1–4:13; 5:11–6:20; 10:19-39; 12:1-17). If God spoke through the prophets, and if Jesus is over the angels, then believers should give Jesus their undivided attention. *Pay the most careful attention* means "to abundantly hold on to." The alternative to holding on to something is to *drift away* (first-century nautical language for the sailing away of a boat).

The former *message* (*logos*) from the time of Moses was put in place with the help of angels (Galatians 3:19). Under that message, people were rewarded or punished accordingly. How much more would that be true of the salvation found in Christ? Therefore, believers should not *ignore* (neglect) that message. Jesus announced it first and the apostles worked miracles to affirm its truthfulness. Jesus is superior to prophets and angels.

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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

BY DAVID FAUST

What made the young carpenter from Nazareth think he could get away with saying such things? His critics wondered, *Who do you think you are?*

They viewed him the way we might see a rookie quarterback comparing himself to Peyton Manning, a Little Leaguer claiming to be better than Babe Ruth, or an aspiring musician claiming to be greater than Beethoven. They shook their heads in disbelief. To the skeptics, this upstart rabbi was making wild boasts—or worse, he was committing blasphemy.

His Identity

When Jesus announced, "Something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42), imagine what his opponents thought. *Really? You're greater than King Solomon? He slept in a palace and ruled from a golden throne. You grew up in a hick town and camp out with your disciples. Solomon raked in tax money, dined with royalty at his banquet table, and collected chariots in his garage. You travel on foot, and your dinner companions have scandalous reputations.*

When Jesus said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46), the doubters didn't realize that in Genesis, he is the promised seed of the woman. In Exodus, he is the Passover lamb. In Leviticus, he is the high priest who mediates for the people. In Numbers, he is the bronze snake on a pole that heals the sick. In Deuteronomy, he is the ultimate prophet who would succeed and surpass Moses.

When Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for a drink and offered her "living water," she asked, "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us [this] well?" (John 4:12). Another time Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56), and his adversaries challenged him. "You are not yet fifty years old," they said, "and you have seen Abraham!" (v. 57). But Jesus didn't back down. He asserted, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" Recognizing his unmistakable claim to deity, the hostile crowd grabbed stones, wanting to kill him as a blasphemer (vv. 58-59).

If someone claims to be greater than Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Solomon—or even more, he claims to be equal with God—what are the options? Either he is deliberately misleading others (a liar); he is mentally unstable (a lunatic); or he is telling the truth (he is the Lord). Jesus' accusers told Governor Pilate, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7). Others, though, investigated Jesus' sinless life, unparalleled teachings, undeniable miracles, and fulfilled prophecies, and concluded he was (and is) exactly who he claimed to be.

Our Identity

Many wanted to know, "Jesus, who do you think you are?" However, he turned the question around and asked, "Who do you say I am?" Some compared him to prophets like Elijah or Jeremiah, but Peter gave the most logical answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16).

Ironically, by realizing who he is, we better understand who we are. Jesus says, "Follow me." Not join a club. Not devote yourself to religious traditions, political platforms, or the latest agendas for social reform. "Follow me." If you hunger for knowledge, he will feed your mind. If you are exhausted, he will give you rest. And when it's time to die, he will give you hope.

Who do you think you are? Follow Jesus, and he will let you know: You are a child of the most high God.

Personal Challenge:

Write out your answer to this question: Who do I think Jesus is? Then write your answer to this question: Who does Jesus say I am?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What opportunities to do good to others did you have over the past week? What happened?

2. How were you strengthened by another believer last week in such a way that it kept you from becoming weary in doing good and helped you reap a harvest?

Ask two people to read aloud **Hebrews 1:1–2:4** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to summarize the passage briefly and simply.

3. As you listened to this passage being read and then summarized, what jumped out to you the most?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - What comparisons and contrasts do you see in this passage?
   - How does the author identify who Jesus really is?
   - What do the Old Testament passages that are cited teach you about angels?
   - What do they teach you about Jesus?
   - What application did the author provide for his teaching about Jesus and angels? (In other words, why does all that matter to us?)
   - How would you use this passage to talk with someone who practices angelolatry (a person who worships or gives excessive honor to angels)?

5. What do you learn overall about Jesus from this passage?

6. What do you learn about yourself?

7. Why is it important for us to pay careful attention to God's Word and act on it?

8. Consider someone you know who believes Jesus was a good person but was neither divine nor our Savior. How will you use this passage, especially, and our discussion, to talk with this person about Jesus' identity?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. What challenges do you anticipate this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Hebrews 3:1-6** as we continue studying the book of Hebrews and the theme, "Superior." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Hold firmly to your confidence and hope in Jesus.**

STUDY: Hebrews (Part 1)

THEME: Superior

LESSON TEXT: Hebrews 3:1-6

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 17:1-8; John 5:41-47; Deuteronomy 5:1-22; 18:15-18

JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO MOSES

BY MARK SCOTT

Bible scholars are united in the Bible's use of typology, but they are divided as to what extent the Bible uses typology. Typology is a person, thing, or event that prophetically prefigures some later fulfillment in the Bible. The fulfillment is called the antitype. Some Bible scholars demand that later revelation must "name it and claim it" for it to be a true type. Other Bible scholars are broader in their embrace of intentions and fulfillments. Comfort levels differ. If the Bible does not connect the fulfillment dots, we certainly must be careful about declaring a typological connection.

Our text probably shows signs of typology. The writer of Hebrews makes the case that Jesus was superior to everything and everyone, including the ginormous person of Moses (though Louie Giglio calls Moses "The Little Leader"). Was Moses in fact a "type" of Christ (Deuteronomy 18:15-18)?

Moses

The three most significant characters in the Old Testament were Abraham, Moses, and David (though Job, Noah, and Daniel also are commended highly—Ezekiel 14:14, 20). Abraham was the father of Israel, David was the singer of Israel, but Moses was the redeemer and lawgiver of Israel. Moses wrote more than any of the others combined. For a man who had platform paralysis (Exodus 4:10), Moses used many words.

The text said Moses was *faithful in all God's house*. Even though Moses questioned his calling, doubted whether God's people would receive his message, failed to honor God before the people (on one occasion), and fearfully fled into the wilderness when his murder of an Egyptian was exposed (Exodus 3:11; 4:1; Deuteronomy 3:26-28; Acts 7:29), he still made faithful choices and endured "disgrace for the sake of Christ" (Hebrews 11:24-28).

Moses was willing to be a *servant*. The word for servant used here is not the one typically used; rather, it is the Greek word *therapon* that means "minister" or "attendant" or "one who is faithful to a superior." As God's servant, Moses was bearing witness to what God would yet do in the future (John 5:46). Moses bore up under incredible pressure as he led God's people (Acts 7:35-41). He was not unlike someone else who would be rejected by his own people as well (John 1:11).

Jesus

Jesus was called an *apostle* (one sent from God) and *high priest* (a concept that will be developed thoroughly in Hebrews). He too was faithful to the one who appointed him. Jesus was consumed with doing the Father's will (John 5:19). This may be why Jesus was called faithful and true (Revelation 19:11). Jesus was found worthy—even more so than Moses. Jesus was worshipped as such in Revelation 5:9-14.

While Moses and Jesus are similar, there is one huge difference. Jesus was a Son, while Moses was a servant. That is no small thing. Jesus' identity is what makes him superior to Moses. Moses was called by God, but Jesus was sent by God. Moses descended from the priestly family, but Jesus was the high priest. Moses was faithful to God, but Jesus was in total solidarity with God (John 8:58). Moses compromised his leadership in the wilderness, but Jesus succeeded in his leadership in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). When Moses "is read," a veil covers the face of the reader, but Jesus enables believers with unveiled faces to behold the glory of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:15-18).

House

In the Bible, the word *house* can mean many things. Sometimes it simply means a physical house. Paul told the Corinthians they had "houses" in which to eat (1 Corinthians 11:34). The word often means "household." This would be a synonym to "family." For instance, Noah built an ark to save his family (Hebrews 11:7). The word sometimes means "tabernacle." David was frustrated that the ark of the covenant was in a tent and voiced his frustration to Nathan. But God told Nathan he had not dwelt in a "house" since the exodus (2 Samuel 7:1-7). Finally, the word *house* can mean "temple." Jesus said the Jewish "house" (temple) would be left desolate (Matthew 23:38).

In this passage "house" is both a metaphor for God's people in general and the church in particular. *Brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling* is church language. The writer even says, "We are his house." It could not be clearer. But the key to remaining Jesus' house is to *hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory*.

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GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

BY DAVID FAUST

Robert Frost wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." A humorist added his own twist: "Actually, home is the place where, when you live there, something has to be fixed!"

Obviously, "every house is built by someone" (Hebrews 3:4a). No house ever emerges from rubble because wood, metal, and glass spontaneously fall into place. If an ordinary house requires an architect to draw up blueprints and a builder to put all the pieces together, doesn't the universe require a creator? "God is the builder of everything" (v. 4b).

What kind of house would God build? Paul said, "God's household . . . is the church of the living God" (1 Timothy 3:15). Peter wrote, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). God's prophets and apostles served as construction workers, building a spiritual temple where the Lord dwells with his people (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house" (Hebrews 3:5); however, he was not the homeowner. That distinction belongs to Jesus, who "is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory" (v. 6).

Taking Care of God's House

To illustrate our responsibilities in the church, consider how you care for your own home.

Keep it clean. Floors need to be vacuumed and mopped, furniture must be dusted, and dishes need to be washed. In the church, sin should be confronted and confessed.

Do preventive maintenance. Storms are coming, so think ahead. Missing shingles must be replaced. Leaky windows must be caulked. Likewise, to weather the storms ahead, church members must learn how to pray, serve, and think biblically.

Invest in upkeep. It takes a lot of money and elbow grease to keep a house in good repair. Home improvements often cost more and take longer than expected. "By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures" (Proverbs 24:3-4). Faithful stewards don't take God's house for granted. They plan carefully and give generously to keep it strong.

Now and then, freshen up the decor. Over time, rooms need new furnishings and fresh coats of paint. While the church's foundational beliefs remain unchanging, new methods and technologies help us communicate with relevance in a changing culture.

Protect it from vandals and thieves. Just as we lock our doors and windows for security reasons, the church must guard against savage wolves that harm the sheep.

Open it to others. Our churches and homes should be places of hospitality—"hospitals" nurturing souls back to health. Referring to the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus said, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17). His church puts out a welcome mat inviting sinners like ourselves from every ethnic group to come and join the family.

An ancient prophet challenged the people, "How is it that it's the 'right time' for you to live in your fine new homes while the Home, God's Temple, is in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4, *The Message*). Until we move into our mansions in Heaven, let's take care of God's house!

Personal Challenge:

How much time, effort, and money do you invest in the place where you live? How does this compare with what you invest in the Lord's church?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. With whom did you discuss Jesus' true identity last week? How did that go?
2. What challenges did you face over the last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Hebrews 3:1-6** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to summarize the passage. Remind them to keep it simple and brief.

3. If you were a Jewish Christian living in the first century and heard this section being read, what might you want to discuss about it?
4. Let's dig deeper:
   - What can you deduce about the people to whom this letter was written?
   - What comparisons and contrasts are made between Moses and Jesus?
   - Why was it important for the writer to convince his Jewish readers that Jesus was greater than Moses?
   - The writer used the construction of a house (or household) as an analogy. What roles do God, Jesus, Moses, and we play in this house?
5. What do you learn about Jesus from this passage?
6. What do you learn about yourself?
7. What specifically does it look like when you "fix your thoughts on Jesus" regularly?
8. As members of God's household (the church), we are to care for each other, encourage each other, and build one another up. How can you strengthen another part of the house that is in need?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. What support do you need to keep your thoughts fixed on Jesus this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Hebrews 10:1-18**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Trust in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice to atone for your sin.**

STUDY: Hebrews (Part 1)

THEME: Superior

LESSON TEXT: Hebrews 10:1-18

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Leviticus 4–5; Psalm 111:9; Romans 6:8-11

JESUS IS A SUPERIOR SACRIFICE

BY MARK SCOTT

The way of God in the world is sacrifice. After the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), God chose sacrifice as the means of getting the world back. Sacrifice forces one to admit how bad sin is. Sacrifice satisfies the demands of justice. Sacrifice was demanded by God (Leviticus 1–7), but hypocritical sacrifice offended God (Isaiah 1:11; Hosea 6:6). Believers can present their bodies to God as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), and worshippers can offer a sacrifice of praise to God (Hebrews 13:15). *Sacrifice* is a key term in this text. It occurs nine times (and a similar word, *offering*, occurs six times).

Hebrews is clearly the "better" Epistle. The writer thus far has argued that Jesus is better than the angels, better than Moses, better than the entire priesthood, and brings a better covenant. Now the writer argues that Jesus is a superior sacrifice—though priesthood, covenant, and sacrifice are quite meshed together. Also, running just beneath the surface of this argument is the recurring exhortation of not committing apostasy by turning away from Christ. Why would one want to turn away from One who was the perfect sacrifice?

The Ongoing Sacrifices

We sometimes can gain greater appreciation for something by comparing it to something else. When we do, oftentimes we find there is "no comparison." A Volkswagen Beetle is not comparable to a BMW. Fast food is not comparable to steak and lobster. Water polo is not comparable to the National Football League. Likewise, the sacrifices that preceded Jesus' unique sacrifice on Calvary were effectual, but their eternal effect was insignificant by comparison.

The law—embedded as it was with the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the covenant—was only a *shadow* of what was to come. The *realities* ("pragmatic" things) were the things of real substance, and these were found only in Christ's sacrifice.

The sacrifices that predated Jesus had multiple problems. First, they had to be repeated year after year. Second, they were less sin remover than an annual sin reminder. Third, though sin could temporarily be forgiven through the sacrifices, the sacrifices failed to substantially improve (*make perfect*) the worshipper. Fourth, the sacrifices of animals (bulls and goats) were utterly futile in really removing sins. In fact, God was not pleased with them even though he had prescribed them in the law. God knew the time would come when the first covenant, with all its sacrifices, would give way to the second covenant. Finally, the priests performed their religious duties (liturgies) with regularity but without significant effect.

The Once-for-All Sacrifice

Jesus Christ's death on the cross, of course, was the once-for-all sacrifice. Calvary was a real hill in time and space. The incarnation was the beginning of this sacrifice. For Jesus to come to earth in the first place was a sacrifice. The writer seemed to put the words of Psalm 40:6-8 into the mouth of Jesus. A body was *prepared* (set—as in setting a broken bone) for Jesus. Jesus would accomplish this sacrifice because he was consumed with doing the will of God (something mentioned twice in the text). There would be no blemish or duplicity in Jesus' offering of himself.

The former sacrifices could not ensure the worshipper would be *holy* (set apart and dedicated to God). But the sacrifice of Jesus could accomplish that *once for all* (a phrase mentioned twice in our text and in Hebrews 7:27; 9:12). In fact, so complete was Jesus' sacrifice that he did not have to give yearly attention to it. When he was done, he *sat down* at the right hand of God. These days, people sit down to work. By contrast, in the ancient world when someone sat down, it meant their work was finished (John 19:30) and their enemies were conquered (Colossians 2:15). No wonder the high priest Jesus received the place of honor at the Father's right hand. This once-for-all sacrifice made the worshippers complete and sanctified.

The writer closes this argument with an exhortation from Jeremiah 31, the famous Old Testament chapter dealing with the new covenant. Jeremiah's people were headed into exile, but God would rescue them and give a new way whereby they could be right with God. God's laws would not be external and on tablets of stone. They would be internal and written on the heart. And sin would not just be rolled back, but put away and not *remembered* (brought against the sinner) ever again. Christ's sacrifice for sin is complete—trust it and trust him.

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WHAT DOES SACRIFICE MEAN TO YOU?

BY DAVID FAUST

The word *sacrifice* has been cheapened by overuse. Is it really a sacrifice to skip dessert or give up gourmet coffee? Baseball players call it a sacrifice when the batter makes an out but moves a teammate to the next base.

Sacrifices can be bad or good. Some workers sacrifice their marriage and children on the altar of their careers, while others turn down lucrative promotions in order to spend more time with their families. In Old Testament times, faithful priests sacrificed animals as prescribed in God's Law while others drifted into idol worship and offered sacrifices to idols.

What does sacrifice mean to us today? Here are three questions to consider.

What have others sacrificed for us? America wouldn't exist without sacrifice. Our nation's founders pledged their fortunes and their sacred honor, and soldiers gave their lives to secure and protect our freedom. Who can measure the sacrifices made by our parents and grandparents? What about all the ways we have benefited from teachers, ministers, public safety workers, and caring neighbors who put our well-being above their own? Do we appreciate the sacrifices of previous generations who constructed the schools where our kids learn and the buildings where we gather to worship?

During the Civil War, on November 21, 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed a letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby of Massachusetts consoling her for the death of her sons who served in the Union army. The letter says, "I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

This leads to another question: **What are we willing to sacrifice for God and others?** Jesus insisted that his disciples "must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Are we willing to view our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1)? Are we motivated to do good and share with others, knowing that "with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:16)? Are we willing to pray as David did in Psalm 51:17, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise"?

Here is the most important question. **What did Christ sacrifice for us?** Imagine what it cost for the Word to become flesh and step down to earth. Christ exchanged the palatial glory of Heaven for the gloomy gutter of Golgotha. He endured multiple scourges: his nation's rejection, the soldier's whip, his friend's betrayal. He took the blame for crimes he never committed and paid the penalty for our wrongdoing. The prophet predicted that the government would be on Christ's shoulders (Isaiah 9:6), but first he had to shoulder a cross.

One sublime sacrifice changed the world—and changed us. "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). In all of human history, no other sacrifice has been so impactful or so costly. The hymn writer was right:

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!

Personal Challenge:

Offer a prayer to the Lord in two parts. Thank him for the sacrifices he was willing to make for you. Then ask him what sacrifices you can make this week for the benefit of others.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you do in keeping your thoughts focused on Jesus over the past week?
2. Did you have a chance to strengthen another part of the "household" of believers last week? How did that go?

Ask two people to read aloud **Hebrews 10:1-18** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to summarize the passage in one minute or less.

3. What part of this passage gives you the most hope?
4. Let's dig deeper:
   - What can the law do and what can't it do?
   - What words and phrases are used to describe the sacrifices performed under the Old Covenant law? (You might want to make a list on a large sheet of paper or board.)
   - What words and phrases are used to describe Jesus' sacrifice? (Add these alongside the previous list.)
   - As you compare these two lists of words and phrases, what understanding of God's grace do you gain?
   - What do the words from Jeremiah 31 (verses 16-17 in our text) add to your comprehension of God's plan for his people?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about yourself?
7. What do you learn from Jesus about obeying God in this passage?
8. What sacrifice(s) can you make for others this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. What help or encouragement could you use in striving to be a more self-sacrificial person this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Hebrews 12:14-29**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **“Be thankful, and . . . worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.”**

STUDY: Hebrews (Part 1)

THEME: Superior

LESSON TEXT: Hebrews 12:14-29

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Jeremiah 31:31-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

JESUS IS MEDIATOR OF A SUPERIOR COVENANT

BY MARK SCOTT

People need mediators. A couple injured in an accident might need a mediator to help them settle a claim with an insurance company. Professional athletes might need a mediator to help them settle contract disputes with owners. Job wanted a mediator to help him argue his case with God (Job 9:33).

Jesus is the ultimate mediator between heaven and earth. In addition to that, Jesus mediates a superior covenant between heaven and earth.

Following the exhortations of drawing near to God and not shrinking back (Hebrews 10:19-39), and after giving numerous examples of people who did just that (chapter 11), the writer of Hebrews challenged people to continue running the race and looking to Jesus (12:1-2). Any difficulties they experienced along the way could help them see those disciplines as evidences of God's love for them (12:3-13).

Two Boys

In making his final exhortations and appeals, the writer of Hebrews mentioned two Old Testament boys who stand in stark contrast. Both lived prior to the Mosaic covenant. The first was Esau, whom Clovis Chappell called "the Sensualist." Esau lived by his glands and impulses. His dad was the patriarch Isaac, and his deceptive brother was Jacob. Esau was not the poster child for how people who have a better covenant live. He was *sexually immoral* (*pornos* in Greek) and *godless* (profane; unhallowed; desecrated). This was why he sold his *inheritance rights* (birthright as firstborn). The story is tragic (Genesis 25:29-34). He regretted doing it, but the incident could not be reversed.

This was why the writer called on believers to *make every effort* (as in hunting down an animal) *to live in peace . . . and to be holy*. Esau certainly did not follow that advice. Almost as an aside, the writer said, *without holiness no one will see the Lord*. Believers are not to fall short of the grace of God or allow a *bitter root* (something offensive to God and destructive to others) to grow.

The second boy was Abel. Though mentioned only briefly, Abel was, in a manner of speaking, a type of Christ. He was victimized and murdered—like Jesus. His innocent blood cried out to God from the earth (Genesis 4:10). But Abel's innocent blood was surpassed by Jesus' saving blood.

Two Mountains

The Mosaic covenant was delivered on Mount Sinai. "Awesome" fails to adequately describe that moment (Exodus 19:9-23; Deuteronomy 9:9-29). The mountain shook and burned with fire (later in the text God is described as a *consuming fire*), and darkness, gloom and storm hung over it. These were "real" symbols of God's presence. The trumpet blast and voice of God were so incredible that the people wanted a mediator (Moses?) to help them. They even wondered how they could rein in their animals lest they die by touching the mountain of God. But their desired mediator (Moses) was himself trembling with fear.

Jesus' covenant was given on Mount Zion. As mentioned in previous lessons, the word *Zion* has many nuances in the Bible. Here it referred to the temple mound of Jerusalem, but the later context would indicate it referred to even more than that. It is possible to understand these verses (Hebrews 12:22-23) as referring to some future kingdom, but they just might be some of the loftiest descriptions of the church anywhere in the Bible. After all, only a thin veil separates the church on earth and the church in heaven. When the worship in a church service is "off the charts" good, it seems a bit like heaven. When the church of the firstborn joins the angels in joyful assembly, all heaven breaks loose. Jesus the mediator is the Judge of all and makes people righteous by sprinkling them with his redemptive blood. The church is a mountain of sorts (Daniel 2:44-45), and that mountain is superior to all others.

One Mediator

The two boys offer a contrast. The two mountains are very different. But the mediator between God and mankind is now one (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15). Believers therefore accept his admonitions (Hebrews 12:25-29). They do not refuse him who speaks. The writer used the *how much less* argument to drive his point home. God's voice shook the earth with the arrival of the Mosaic covenant, but he would shake the earth again with the coming of the church and the beginning of the end (Haggai 2:6; Acts 2:19-20). If we are kingdom members of the superior covenant, then we cannot be shaken, and therefore we can worship with reverence and awe.

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CLIMBING THE WRONG MOUNTAIN

BY DAVID FAUST

Hebrews 12 compares two mountains. Mount Sinai was dark and scary, and for most people it was unapproachable. Even Moses confessed that God's holy presence on the mountain made him tremble with fear. Fortunately for us, Jesus is "the mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 12:24), so we are invited to a different kind of mountaintop experience. "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." On this heavenly mountaintop there are "thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly" along with "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (vv. 22-23).

These two mountains illustrate two different approaches to life. The mountain called Law is a rugged one, too steep to conquer. We slip and fall again and again on that rocky trail. We will never make it to the top by our own efforts. The mountain called Grace is rugged, too, but instead of trying to struggle our way to the top, we trust the Son of God to lift us in his arms and carry us up to the Father.

On the Wrong Path

Trying to climb the mountain of Law will leave us frustrated and exhausted. How can we tell if we are on the wrong path?

We may be climbing the wrong mountain if we are constantly at odds with others. God's grace enables us to be gracious. Jesus predicted that the world would hate those who love him (John 15:18-23) so we'll never please everyone, but we don't have to be chronically cranky. Hebrews 12 says, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone" (v. 14). Heavenly wisdom makes people "pure . . . peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). If interpersonal conflict follows everywhere you go, maybe you're trying to climb the wrong mountain.

We are climbing the wrong mountain if we have grown comfortable with sin. The writer urges us to "be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). We're saved by grace, but we shouldn't be nonchalant about right and wrong. God's mercy motivates us to say "no" to ungodliness. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

We may be climbing the wrong mountain if we are filled with bitterness. "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (v. 15). Roots grow underground, so they're not obvious on the surface. The problem is, bitter roots lead to bitter fruit. On this side of Heaven, God doesn't spare us from all hurts and disappointments, but our souls don't have to turn sour. The Holy Spirit produces a sweet crop of "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Christ transports us to heights we could never reach on our own, taking us to scenic summits where we can "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28). That's what it's like on the mountain of Grace.

Personal Challenge:

Talk with a trusted friend about the comparison between the two mountains presented in this article. Ask each other, "What is the difference between trying to climb the mountain of Law and letting the Lord carry you up the mountain of Grace?"

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you do in striving to be more self-sacrificial over the past week? Have an example to share?

2. What new challenges did you face last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Hebrews 12:14-29** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. What contrasting ways of living are addressed in this passage?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - What images are used to describe Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law (vv. 18-21)?
   - In comparison, what images are used to describe Mount Zion, which represents the church and God's kingdom (vv. 22-24)?
   - How can Esau's life serve as a warning for us?
   - How do you see the Old Covenant law and the New Covenant of God's grace contrasted in this passage?
   - "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). How do these verses help you further understand the meaning of the Hebrews passage we're studying?
   - Look at the word *receiving* in verse 28. What does that word choice indicate about God's grace?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about yourself?

7. This passage provides several instructions for how we can live in God's grace, as members of his church and kingdom (see phrases that begin with "make every effort" and "see to it"). Which of these will you focus on obeying this week?

8. How does what you've learned from this passage lead you to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe"? What will that look like for you this week? Be specific!

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. What can you be thankful for during the upcoming week?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.