

STUDY ON HEBREWS

Reflections on This & That
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ARE GENTILE BELIEVERS

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is addressed to Jews—not Gentiles! It’s addressed to a people whose fathers were brought up out of the land of Egypt, who had a covenant made with them; a covenant they continued to break down the years. It is to them that God said he would make a new covenant.

The Hebrew writer calls on that text in Hebrews 8:6-13 and he calls the new covenant a “second” covenant. It’s the second covenant because it replaces the first covenant. He says if the first covenant had accomplished what he had in mind God would not have sought for a second. Since Israel continually proved faithless to the first covenant God took away the first that he might establish the second (Hebrews 10:9). It was by this second that believing Jews were set apart as the people of God (Hebrews 10:10).

This covenant of which Jesus is the embodiment and the mediator (Hebrews 8:6) is “new” in relation to Israelites. Those who knowingly rejected Jesus were to be “cut off” from among “the people” (Act 3:22-23). Jewish people are no longer in covenant relationship with God on the basis of the first covenant because that first covenant was removed (and with the removal the removal of the condemnation it brought the nation) so that God could fulfil his promises to them in and by Jesus Christ in a second covenant. Those who knowingly reject the second covenant and cling to (or return to) the first covenant are under a covenant that proclaims their condemnation as a "national" entity. That is, as a nation constituted "a nation" under the terms of the Mosaic/Sinaitic covenant they have been condemned by the very covenant that constituted them a "kingdom" and "nation".

The gracious God did not “dump” Israel but offered them a new relationship with him in and by Jesus under the terms of a new and second covenant.

To speak of the new covenant in relationship to Gentiles is a mistake. God had made no first covenant with them nor did he make a second covenant with them. The terms new and first and second deal with the covenant in Jesus from a Jewish perspective.

Gentiles share in the covenant made in and by Jesus, of course (see 2 Corinthians 3) but we need to allow specific texts to make their own specific points.

In Jesus Christ God brought together Jews and Gentiles as the People of God (Ephesians 2:11-22 and elsewhere), making of them “one new man”. But how he unfolded his eternal purpose in history must be acknowledged. Jews and Gentiles are equal and fellow-heirs in Jesus and God eternally purposed it to be so (Ephesians 2—3) but it was through Jews and not Gentiles that he developed his theodrama in history. We need to acknowledge this.

Gentiles partake of the blessing of Israel’s promises (Romans 11:17-24 and Romans 15:27) and we need to remember that.

We need to allow the Hebrew writer to address his Jewish brothers and sisters. We need to allow the truth, “To the Jew first...” (Romans 1:16 and Acts 3:25-26 and 13:46) for so God purposed it and has worked it out. We need to allow Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8 to address who they address—people who continually broke the first covenant, whose fathers were led up out of Egypt and so forth.

I think too that we should insist that all who have the faith of Abraham are “Abraham’s children” for he and he alone was circumcised after his relationship was established with God (Romans 4:9-11). This wasn’t true of Isaac or Jacob (Israel) and they are not the “fathers of all that believe”. Romans 4:11 expressly claims that Abraham was not circumcised until after he was made right with God in order that he might be the father of all who believed whether Jews or Gentiles.

Gentile Christians are not “children of Israel”. True “Israelites” Paul would say (Romans 9:6) are physical descendants of Jacob (Israel) who have embraced Jesus in faith (compare Revelation 2:9, 3:9 and John 8:32-44). Those who knowingly reject Jesus are not truly Israelites. There is an “Israel of God” over against an “Israel” which is uncovenanted (compare Galatians 6:16, a disputed text).

Jews and Gentiles who have embraced Jesus in faith are “Abraham’s children and heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26-29). From a historical viewpoint and in light of how God developed his redemptive purpose Gentiles are not “Israel” though they are certainly Abraham’s children.

HEBREW WRITER SAID (1)

Church attendance was down, spirits were low and getting lower, disappointment was in the air and some were drifting away from the Christ and going back; listening to the backward call of an old environment. But, as Thomas Long observed, it wasn't a pep-talk the Hebrew offered this depressed community or a new programme that would help the church to grow. It was one of the richest theological works in existence.

The Hebrew writer said to these discouraged people, "What you had was true but fragmentary what you now have is the whole Story. What you had was brought to you by prophets and angels but what you now have was brought to you by a Son who is part of the Godhead. What you had was real but was still only a shadow of what was to come; what you now have is the real thing. Where you were going as you travelled was wonderful but where you are now going takes the breath away and beggars description. The covenant you had was glorious but the one you now have outshines it as the sun outshines an oil lamp. The fellowship you enjoyed was huge and wondrous but the fellowship you're part of now embraces the universe of beings. Who you followed was heroic and majestic but who you follow now towers above him like a mountain over an ant hill. You once followed a faithful house servant but now you follow the Son in the house and the builder of it.

All that is greatest and best in what you had is gathered up, cherished and brought to the fullness to which it pointed. All that was glorious and permanent in your former life is treasured and deepened beyond imagination. The sacrifices that spoke profound truths are

now swallowed up—not despised—in the one sacrifice to which they bore witness. The city you so rightly prized and stood as a beacon of light to the world has been made more splendid by transformation and association with the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The faith that made your history and nation great—as reflected in people like Abraham, Sarah, Jochebed and Moses, Joshua and Deborah and in events at the Red Sea and heroism in chains—that history brought you to these days. The faith that brought your ancestors through until now has brought your ancestors to you for only with you who have placed your faith in Jesus, the Messiah, are they made perfect.

The Hebrew writer said to his readers, "Your past was glorious, your gifts were prizes indeed, your leaders were worthy, your covenant towered above all others and your blessing within in the bounds of that covenant was rich and real."

But what is that to us? This ancient writer spoke of even more ancient realities; things like curtains, priestly rituals, temple gatherings, animal sacrifices, pomp and lineage, censers and mountains and heroes with feet of clay. What is all that to us? The past is past and it wasn't even our past. We can see ancient Jews being interested in such things but now reading such a book is like doing archaeology. Unearthing and rummaging the past.

That's a serious consideration and I suppose many of us justify our continued "archaeological" work on the basis of finding principles we can apply. I don't say that looking for principles is a bad thing but that practice must be handled with great care. "Their situation is like ours so we can apply the principles the Hebrew writer laid down to our situation." Hmm. I can see that that might have some place in what we're supposed to engage in but if we had asked the Hebrew writer if he was laying down "principles" he would probably have been offended by our ignorance.

The Hebrew writer was laying down the gospel! He was unveiling the person and work of Jesus Christ and in light of Jesus Christ he was judging all that they had ever known or would know. He had nothing to say about general "principles" (especially general "moral" principles) and everything to say about Jesus Christ and what he meant.

Jesus himself, speaking of his cross in John 12:31, said, "Now this world is judged!" The Hebrew writer, speaking in light of Jesus Christ, said, "Now is the past with all its glories and pleasures judged!"

If what the Hebrew writer said about Jesus Christ (and not "principles"!) has nothing to say to us all then we should regard it as a dated, ancient old book with an interesting argument for 1st century Jewish people. But he spoke of a Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today and forever."

That same Jesus Christ, in and through whom the entire creation holds together (Hebrews 1:3), is Lord of all (compare Hebrews 1:4 and Philippians 2:9—11). And in light of him—the ever living and ever present one, all our pasts and pleasures and glories and dreams are judged.

If we can lock Jesus Christ into the past, then the book of Hebrews can only be of archaeological interest. A relic! If he is as alive today as ever he was, and as he ever will be, then he is present to judge our very existence. The Hebrew writer would say to a converted hedonist that is now depressed, "Your past may have been pleasant but..." He would say of our religious experience apart from Jesus Christ, "It was impressive and satisfying but..." He would say of our non-believing arguments, "They were plausible but..."

If it is something less than Jesus Christ that the Hebrew writer is talking about it might not be enough. But if it is Jesus Christ himself and all that he means then we need nothing more.

HEBREW WRITER SAID (3)

In chapters 1 and 2 the Hebrew writer said that prior to Jesus Christ the truth of God was given in fragments that led the way to the present in which all the purposes and promises have been and are being fulfilled. He said they are and were being fulfilled in the one whom God has made the heir of all things. This was more than a prophet—it was a "son". (There is no possessive or definite article in the Greek; it's simply *en huiō*, which stresses status and difference from "servants" rather than his relationship to his Father.)

These fragments of truth were given by servants (prophets) but this fullness of truth and the fulfillment of all God's purposes are centered in and brought to fulfillment in an incarnate Son (and not merely a servant) that is the very image of God. He's the glue that holds all things together and his is the power that maintains all that exists. Though he became a human and for a little while (see 2:7,9) was made a little lower than angels he accomplished his redeeming work and was exalted above the angels. (1:1-3)

The OT covenant and Torah were brought to Israel by angels (angels that appeared in bushes and on mountains, angels that represented God and spoke for him—compare Acts 7:32-32,35,38). But God himself brought this new covenant; it came by one that is part of the divine "family" and not one of the angelic beings. (1:4-14)

That being true, it's of critical importance that they don't drift from the truth that has now been brought to them. For if the OT that was brought by angels had to be obeyed and demanded faithfulness how much more is that true of truth brought by God himself and confirmed by miracles and such? (2:1-4) Here the Hebrew writer doesn't have a host of individual truths or commands in mind; he has in mind the covenant and the Torah that was immediately linked with it. It's apostasy that the Hebrew writer has in mind and not simply "committing sins". Committing sins is not to be scoffed at but it is full scale apostasy the writer has in mind. He tells us that every disobedience was punished but we know that isn't true of every individual sin committed by individuals. The book of Judges and the exiles would illustrate what he has in mind.

Prior to Jesus, angels had brought liberating truth and while it was truth they brought, they were almost spectators of those to whom they brought the truth. That was not the case with the Messiah. He brought no truth that he offered from a distance. His truth was embodied truth. He brought help and salvation by becoming one of those in trouble. Though higher than all the angels he became for a while lower than angels (see 2:7-9, taking *brachu ti* as temporal rather than qualitative). He became a son of Israel, a child of Abraham and wasn't ashamed to be called their brother. He worshipped with them and saw what they feared most, embraced it and in that way defeated death, and thus the fear of death and the world spirit that had introduced death to the world through sin (compare Genesis 3:1-4,19). No, this was no angelic spectator and so he could understand the troubles and weaknesses of Israel as he brought them to glory. (2:5-18)

HEBREWS WRITER SAID (4)

Sometimes non-believers say silly things that avoid the more obvious truth that faces us all. Of course they're not alone—we believers know how to do that as well. We used to hear how culturally backward the ancients were (I don't deny some were, especially since so many moderns are) and this was supposed to explain their belief in miracles or general providence. That's why they spoke of something like floating axe-heads and virgins births—we were told. Poor things, they were so ignorant that they didn't know that axe-heads sank or how babies were made. Had they really understood the laws of biology and physics they wouldn't have spoken of miracles—so we were told. It seems, at least in Joseph's case, that it was because he

did understand the laws of biology that he thought of divorcing his espoused wife (see Matthew 1:18-19).

But it's this ancient ignorance—we're assured—that leads people like the Hebrew writer to say that the universe is carried and governed by the powerful will and wisdom of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:3). Paul is no smarter, we're told, when he claims that it's in Jesus Christ that the entire creation holds together (sunesteken in Colossians 1:17 is a perfect indicative and speaks of a permanent reality—all things remain standing together in him).

These people didn't know about gravitation—how could they? Newton hadn't yet been born or whacked with a falling apple. I suppose the difference between faith and unfaith has little to do with the very basic laws of life but the status we grant them. Non-believing scientists describe what they see (or theorize about what they don't see) and leave it at that while believers go on and give the "laws" or what is seen a place under God.

Only a fool despises true science and only another kind of fool worships science. In light of Newton's work "everybody knows" that what sustains our solar system or the entire universe is gravitation. But that requires matter, and what if you can't find enough observable matter in the universe to keep it from flying apart? This question becomes even more urgent because you discover that even the hydrogen at the extremities of the observable universe is being manipulated by some gravitational pull and that the universal expansion is speeding up rather than slowing down. What do you do to explain why all things continue to hold together? You first you come up with a theoretical and undetectable particle (dark matter) and when that's not enough you come up with something you call "dark energy". It doesn't matter that dark matter can't be detected and that there's no known equipment that can detect it. It doesn't matter that no one knows what "dark energy" is, though it accounts—we're told—for 75% of what the universe is made of.

I don't say there's no such thing as dark matter or dark energy (though many scientists think they're fictions required by needless theories). It doesn't matter to believers that scientists some day might be able to show the physical realities that are involved in the coherence of the universe. If they did, the Hebrew writer (and Paul) would say, "My, my, now that's really interesting." But it wouldn't change their views on what sustains the "laws" of physics. They knew how a rain shower developed and they still said God sent the rain (see Jeremiah 5:24, 14:22 and Matthew 5:45).

It isn't hard to show that the sun "rises" in the east because of the earth's rotating. That's the descriptive part of the story. But believers will agree with G.K Chesterton who said that the sun rises in the morning because God says, "Get up!"

What the Hebrew writer said (5)

I don't know if Friedrich Nietzsche was an atheist or not. He certainly reads like one but careful scholars have recently suggested that N was more a Joban figure than an atheist. The God he raged against and said was dead, it's been suggested, was the God that spineless Christians invented; the one that loved weakness and groveling. That God was dead and deserved to be. Be that as it may, N looked at the Christianity around him and raged against its impotence and ranted against its shrewd way of making weakness a virtue and strength a vice. When people piously bleated about Jesus or God as "saviour" he would snarl that first they needed to show that they'd been saved and then there could be talk about their "saviour". He had a point! "Christians," he insisted, covered the failure of Christianity to make a real difference in the world—covered it by bleating on about submission rather than ambition, obedience and weakness really being strength and leadership. The hierarchy kept the sheep in line with this drivel and the flock were more than willing to go along with it. The entire "Christian" enterprise reeked of impotence and as a substitute for real humans it produced

sniveling, gutless wimps and it did it by getting them to worship a God that was impotent, growing old and decomposing.

The Hebrew writer and N would have had heated discussions had they met but N wouldn't have confused the Hebrew writer for a body of a different sort. The Hebrew writer spoke of impotence and weakness but it had to do with ancient sacrifices and priestly systems and people that didn't have it in them to finish the race set before them. When he spoke of God and Jesus Christ his only Son he repeatedly says, "He is able!"

He is able to give help to the tempted (2:18)

He is able to save out of death (5:17, 11:19)

He is able to save utterly and entirely (7:25)

HEBREW WRITER SAID (6)

I mentioned that Friedrich Nietzsche roasted Christianity for creating wimps and sniveling cowards. He said the Christian leaders took the life out of life; they made ambition and strength a crime and called groveling and submission virtue. He called people to resist that blood-sucking religion and urged them not to neglect the hero in their souls. Poor Nietzsche was wrong in many things but in an evangelical Western world that's awash with ceaseless sympathy, a tireless proclamation that woos people and a God who (it seems) will just weep with us as soon as our bottom lip trembles—in light of that N had a call that needs to be given a hearing.

The Hebrew Christians are depressed, church attendance is down, they're missing the comfort of their old and familiar environment and they're bitterly disappointed that the dream of fulfilled promises was greater than the fulfillment they were experiencing in Jesus Christ. What do you say to such people? Beyond words of assurance, I mean.

Should there be compassion and gentleness? Well of course, and those that give it should give it without apology; but there should be words that put heart in the people, words that take their trouble seriously without making it appear that "trouble" is the last word. There should be words so spoken to real sufferers that help them to face bravely and hopefully—yes, hopefully!—what it is that they endure day after day.

[As I write this I'm half afraid that some tormented soul might read it and think I am trivialising his/her trouble. With my heart on its knees I vow before God I mean to do no such thing. I've seen troubled lives and it makes me impatient with those that act and speak as though inconvenience or acute but past trouble is a lifelong purgatory. That kind of trouble is nothing like the awful and obscure "long, long patience of the plundered poor." And like every other person that has a heart I'm sickened by predatory wealth and power. What our strength and efforts cannot change God swears he will change and one day all wrongs will be righted in the fullest sense of that phrase.]

In the meantime, to dispirited people who know what suffering means the Hebrew writer said was this: "In your struggle...you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." (Hebrews 12:4)

Can you imagine saying that to a complaining modern Western congregation and can you imagine the reaction it would get? And if the assembly actually was having a tough time you'd be accused of being heartless! Strange Hebrew writer, who can say such a thing and in the same breath call them "beloved" (agapetoi) in 6:9. How did he dare to speak that way to people who knew what it was to have suffered loss for Jesus Christ (see 10:32-34)?

How do you suppose his 12:4 has come to sound so alien to us?

Hebrew writer said (7)

Hebrews 6:10 is a word of great comfort. It's one of the statements in scripture that while it doesn't deny or undermine the majestic sovereignty of God it brings him within our reach. We are in his image, are like and to be like him—but this passage seems to put the shoe on the other foot; God is like us!

"God is not unjust," he says, "he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them." He has been very stern in the preceding verses but now he softens his tone and calls them "beloved" (6:9—agapetoi) and says something very human about God. Some versions add the word "so" in order to catch the tone (see the REB and the NJB). "God is not so unrighteous as to forget..." The "so" is not to suggest that God is a little unrighteous! We use that kind of expression when we say of someone that people might be expressing a hard view of, "Oh, come on, he's not so insensitive as all that."

I can see where pain and anger would make it hard for us to give credit where credit's due to someone who has grieved us. That makes sense. Still, a fine human will take into account the goodness in someone and will give that person credit for what he/she has done. Think no less of God! Okay, so we note their blunders and failures and call those what they are but we're not so vindictive that we're incapable of seeing that it isn't the entire story of their lives or character. [I say that fully recognizing that some of us are so vindictive at times.]

The Lord who sees all our wrong also sees our sincere efforts to be good. Jesus who knew the flaws in his disciples said of them that they were the ones that stood by him in all his troubles (Luke 22:28). Isn't that a lovely quality in Jesus? He learned it from his Father.

Listen, God is not insensitive or unfair. He won't forget what you have done and are doing in his name—not even the giving of a cup of cold water, a simple word of uplifting or a warm, welcoming smile to a shy and fearful heart.

That's what the Hebrew writer said.

Think noble things of God.

HEBREWS 2: 9, WE SEE JESUS (1)

A reader wonders how it can be true that Jesus is Lord of all, having all things put under him when the Hebrew writer says (2:8) that we do not yet see all things subject to him. Ephesians 1:19-23, 1 Peter 3:22, Philippians 2:5-10, Matthew 28:18, from among scores of texts, affirm Christ's established Lordship over all. Even Hebrews 2:8 says, "In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him." See too 1 Corinthians 15:27.

So have all things been subjected to him or not? Well, of course they have! That he hasn't yet obliterated all his enemies is no proof that he isn't the Lord of them. That he chooses to work in and through his enemies (and to work for many of them—see Peter 3:9) is no reason to deny his already existing Kingship. As Psalm 110 puts it, he rules in the midst of his enemies.

As yet we don't see all his enemies destroyed or humiliated. But then there are a lot of things we don't see or experience; but that doesn't deny the truth and reality of them. We don't see all the gangsters, corrupt politicians, sleazy landlords, porn and vice and drug barons, warlords, pedophile rings or financial tyrants exposed and punished—but we see Jesus!

"If Jesus were already Lord over all evil they would have been destroyed by now." Would it indeed? God has been God and Lord from the moment of the sinful Rebellion—why wasn't it crushed right at the beginning? Maybe 2 Peter 3:9 and passages like it come into play here. One day we will see, that is, personally observe, in all its fruit, the already established Lordship of Jesus

HEBREWS 2:9, WE SEE JESUS (2)

Unchanging appearances can kill hope. The same enemies year after year. The same difficulties time after time. Failed methods, failed plans, failed attempts can kill hope. "I keep trying. I'm tired of trying. Nothing changes, nothing makes any difference. The brutal fact is that nothing can be done about the way things are. I'm weary of pep talks and pop psychology. It all sounds great until I turn to face reality."

Is that so hard to understand? I've felt and sometimes feel like that. But if things are so bad, why do we still feel in our bones that they'll get better? How do we explain that renewed sense of hope even after months or years when everything seems to be such a dead heave?

We continue to hope because we've "seen" something. Someone! We see Jesus (Hebrews 2:9).

Though we haven't seen our Lord and Saviour with our eyes, like the brave men and women to whom Peter wrote, we continue to hope for our salvation. He spoke of a salvation not yet fully revealed, a goal for which they aimed, a hoped-for inheritance. See 1 Peter 1:3-6. In his second letter he described these hopeful people as looking for a new heaven and a new earth and they looked forward to this new world simply on the basis of the Lord's promise (2 Peter 3:13).

It's true they were travelling toward something they hadn't actually, or at least fully, seen, but they had seen enough to know their journey was well spent. Along with those who maintained their trust we can say:

We don't see all the crooks behind bars, but we see Jesus.

We don't see the porn industry permanently put down, but we see Jesus.

We don't see the drug bosses out of business, but we see Jesus.

We don't see the vice rings smashed for all time, but we see Jesus.

We don't see any reason to believe the world's getting better, but we see Jesus.

We see uncleanness in our hearts, but we see Jesus.

We see our trivial ways and pathetic goals, but we see Jesus.

We see broken promises and suffocating nations, but we see Jesus.

We see increasing numbers of the vulnerable aged, the depletion of natural resources and massive unemployment, but we see Jesus.

They looked their world right in the eye and saw it for what it was and with confident smiles got on with living. When all the props are taken from us, when our friends are gone, our money spent, our health deteriorating and our hope for a better society is smashed on the rock of human wickedness then we'll be thrown on to Christ. In utter dependence on him we'll be able to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8).

From the book, "Jesus: Hero of thy Soul," used by permission from Howard Publishing, West Monroe, Louisiana, 1998

HEBREWS 6 & 10 AND FALLING AWAY

Some readers were asking about Eternal Security and especially in connection with Hebrews 6 and 10. Listen, I'm convinced that the scriptures teach this: a saving relationship with God exists by faith. God's grace and his sufficient work in Jesus Christ is the ground and inspiration of that faith that brings us into and keeps us in a saving relationship with God. We don't get to it by moral grunting and sweating. It's God's work in us but it's not God's work independent of us. However we look at it (and this is the view of the centuries as well as the plain teaching of scripture) we stand in grace through faith! If there was no grace there could be no salvation or faith. If there is no faith grace doesn't save us. It's true that faith is a gracious work of God in us (Philippians 1:29, Romans 10:17, Acts 18:27 and elsewhere) but God doesn't

inject it into us and by its very nature it doesn't exist unless it has our free and vital ongoing consent and commitment. The graciousness of the gift doesn't render us incapable of despising it and throwing it away from us.

Salvation is an aspect of our relationship with God and our relationship with God is not, I repeat, it is not a legal decision! It is God's holy and gracious work reconciling us to himself. He draws us in Christ to believe in and love him in and through Jesus Christ. We are at one with him—our hearts are in tune with him—it isn't just a "status" it is a "relationship". But this relationship has the free consent of our hearts and minds. We aren't zombies or automata. We are friends of God in Jesus Christ. And we can turn from him (2 Peter 2:20-22) and refuse to abide in him (John 15:5-6). To do that is to reject God and the relationship is ended. To say that we're powerless to reject God and the relationship is to ignore the meaning of "reconciliation" and "friendship" with God.

There are verses which make this point but I think we should be looking more at the nature of our relationship in Christ, the nature of reconciliation and what it means to be at one with God. As soon as we drop the notion that it is some kind of once-for-all legal declaration of "acquittal" and see it as a free and glad surrender of our heart drawn to God in and through Jesus Christ it becomes clear that we can walk away. Then we don't have to hunt for verses to prove this or that. Can we fall away from the grace that is in Christ and nowhere else? Yes! Galatians 5:4 expressly says so. But in saying that Paul was trying to prove they could fall away, he was proclaiming it. If they turned salvation into (in that context) Jewish national righteousness they fall away from God's grace extended to them in and through Jesus Christ..

Some of the Hebrews Christians were threatening to turn from Christ and some had already done it (Hebrews 6:1-4 and 10:25-26). They were going back to a sacrificial system that had served its temporary but important purpose and in doing that they were rejecting the sacrifice of Christ. The judgment on such people is clearly spelled out. Leave Christ and there's no other sacrifice that will bring them to God. If they did that they were leaving their only hope of salvation. What awaited them was what Hebrew 6:8 and 10:27-31 lays out.

Twice the Hebrew writer says such people can't get back or be renewed to repentance. But he makes those remarks on the assumption that they will continue to hold on to their old sacrificial and shadow system. It's as if he said, "As long as they cling on to their old ordinances and sacrifices there's no way back." He isn't saying that it was literally impossible for them to hear the gospel again at some point and come to faith again. No! But he is underlining the danger that having drunk deeply of the truth about Christ and then blatantly rejected it, that there is no way back except by the one they've just betrayed. They saw him in all his glory and experienced him and then they walked away. What would it take to get them back? The only way back is through the One they just spurned. Looking for another way would always be vain and they'd never get back to God. They would have burned the only bridge by which they could get back to God.

You understand he could be saying it is literally impossible for them to be converted once they've fallen away under those circumstances, but there's no need to understand it that way. A thing may be "impossible" practically speaking given the actual situation, that is, if the conditions are so against them—see what Christ says about rich men, camels and needle's eyes in Mark 10:24-27 and the parallel texts. As long as wealthy men adore their riches they can't enter the kingdom and as long as those Hebrews clung to the old system to which they went back there's no way for them to be saved. See what you make of the piece on the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit also in this section.

This I know. The New Testament teaches the security of the believer. While we have faith in Christ we're to be perfectly assured. If we walk away from Christ we should worry indeed. Hebrews 10:27-31.

HEBREWS 9:26-28

The Hebrew writer says that one of the weaknesses of the OT priesthood and sacrificial system was that sin was never dealt with decisively and definitively (9:25 and see 10:1-3). The Levitical priests appeared ceaselessly before the Lord offering countless sacrifices for sin.

The Hebrew writer said Jesus appeared a first time to deal with sin (9:26). I say he said Jesus appeared a first time to deal with sin because he goes on to say that Jesus would appear a second time not to deal with sin (9:28).

The first time Jesus appeared is the only time he appeared to deal with sin. There is no other appearance that deals with sin so he had better have dealt with it the first time or we're all in trouble. But he did deal with it and he did deal with it in his first appearance.

He dealt with it in his first appearance with a once-for-all atonement (9:26).

The Hebrew writer distinguishes that first appearance from a second appearance.

He doesn't make them one appearance—he says they are two.

He says they are different from one another and he spells out the nature of the difference.

He says the first appearance annulled or took away sin in a definitive and once-for-all action.

He says more than that. To make it clear beyond doubt, he explicitly says the second appearance has nothing to do with dealing with sin—that's a done deal. He makes this remark to underscore the truth that Christ dealt with sin once and for all in his first appearance and that his sacrifice is nothing like the Levitical arrangement.

He insists that Jesus will appear again (9:28) but that it will not be to offer sacrifice to take away sin (that was completed in a previous appearance!).

He says that for those who have experienced the taking away of their sins Jesus will appear a second time to bring them salvation. The salvation he will bring will be for those who eagerly look for him and have received his completed work done in a previous appearance. [The implication for those who have refused and want nothing to do with him is stark.]

Any doctrine then that is grounded on the view that it was at this second appearance that sin was dealt with is far wide of the mark. We occasionally hear that this second appearance speaks of the 70 AD judgment on Israel and that it was then, at 70 AD and not before, that the atonement was accomplished and sin was dealt with. It's plain to see that that view runs in direct opposition to the text here.

Any doctrine that offers hope for forgiveness to those who impenitently spurn Jesus lives in tension with this text.

What the Hebrew writer says buries numerous interesting speculations.

HOW DOES GOD "DEFINE" FAITHFULNESS?

I purpose to say something later about "faith" as distinct from "faithful".

In the biblical witness, does "faithful" mean sinless?

Does "faithful" mean "sinlessly keeping God's commandments"?

If it does, then only one individual in the entire human history was "faithful—Jesus Christ!

It's true, in a sense, that only Jesus was faithful to the Holy One. But we usually say something like, "Jesus is the only one completely faithful to God." For several reasons this is good and useful speech. Among other things, it reminds us that we are sinners and often fail God while Jesus never ever failed him. He did "always the things that please Him."

Still, if we read in Scriptures that sinners have been "faithful" to God; if we hear them described as people of faith then we must accept that as true. And we do hear sinners described as men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 and many other places. If that's the case—and it is—then we should happily accept it, especially since we are all sinners. If people who sin can't be regarded as people of faith then we're all in trouble—yes?

So, great sinners are said to be men and women of faith! What's more, when they're described that way it isn't a begrudging remark. It isn't as though the scriptures said, "Well, I suppose they were faithful. I suppose we could call them that even though it's true that they were sinners and blundered a lot. Just the same, it makes you wonder."

No, that's not the tone at all!

Hebrews 11 lists and alludes to men and women—sinners, everyone—and sings their praise as people of faith. The Hebrew writer doesn't mutter or whisper or murmur their names; he doesn't sheepishly mention them in a tone of reluctance or half embarrassment—he brags on them! He sets them up as examples for the ages! He even tells us that God was proud of them; that God wasn't ashamed to be called their God [11:16]. He goes on to close out the list by saying of these sinners, "Of whom the world was not worthy!" [11:38].

He's saying that of Abraham who twice sent his wife to a harem to save his own neck? He's saying that of Jacob whose very name meant "cheater" [and he lived up to it]? He's saying that of the drunken Noah, Moses, who was excluded from the land for unbelief, the prostitute Rahab, the murderous and adulterous David, the bandit Jephthah, the uncontrolled Samson, and the rest? These are the faithful people, the people he wants his peers to admire and follow in faith?

They are!

He wasn't ignorant of their great sins and he wasn't calling his drifting bothers and sisters to follow in the sins of these men and women of faith. He was reminding his readers that what made the esteemed ancestors was their faith that God was faithful, that God would indeed fulfill his promises no matter what the present seemed to say [Hebrews 11:8-13, 39]. God had made promises and these men and women gave their word to the God they believed was faithful and they kept it! Others might walk off after other gods but they wouldn't. Life's conditions would change, new kings would come on the scene, new nations would gain power, new challenges would rush at them that left them wondering what God was doing [or not doing]. But for all that, they had come to stay and they stayed!

They were all weak—everyone without exception. Some were weaker than others, some were stronger in some areas and weaker in others. If we had kept a list of the number of wrongs and rights some would have been lower on the ladder of moral excellence than others. They were all different but they were all the same. They were all sinners and yet every one of them was faithful!

It had nothing to do with quantity of sins committed and good deeds done! The Hebrew writer was no accountant! He didn't deal in numbers but in hearts. He looked back over the history of his ancestors, not looking for non-sinners but for the faith-filled! He didn't search for those who had the lowest numbers of sins committed or the greatest number of virtuous deeds carried out.

He wasn't looking for moral excellence or for who was "better" than others. He was looking for faith! And he found it in amazing people!

God called great sinners "faithful". How are we to explain that?

Well, before you attempt the explanation accept God's judgment on the matter! Don't debate it—believe it!

THE HEBREW WRITER'S AIM AND SO WHAT?

I could easily see Jews [Jews who are Christians and those that aren't reading the book of Hebrews with special interest. If they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah it's to be expected that their motivation would be to critique it. If they were Jews who have embraced Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and Lord it would be to learn more about Him and his purpose. Jews, I would confidently suspect, would be especially interested in Moses, Aaron, tabernacle, priests, animal sacrifices, curtains, genealogies, Joshua, the Old Covenant, the heroes of Israel's history and such. How would that be difficult to understand?

What is surprising [at least] is that Gentiles would find it interesting, much less sometimes enthralling.

Here's this book, something like 2,000 years old that from beginning to end speaks of things that have peculiar relevance to people with a Jewish background and we Gentiles eagerly pore over it.

Of course, it must be said, that we mostly look to the book of Hebrews for arguments to prove that we are right to view Jesus as we do. Is this not true? I think it is true.

But when did we the Gentile rank and file ever meet a Jew and reason with him? When did we ever reason with a devout Jew [if ever we did] in favor of Jesus using the book of Hebrews?

I think our abiding interest in the book of Hebrews is more than surprising—I think it is close to astonishing, especially if we forget the writer's aim!

The Hebrew writer's aim is to keep Jewish believers on their feet!

Church attendance was down, disappointment was everywhere, some had walked away and no longer assembled with Jesus-believing fellow-Jews. They were drifting back to the Judaism they knew with its sacrifices, Aaronic priesthood and visible structures, back to what Jerusalem stood for and the Hebrew writer wanted to stop the rot among them and enrich their faith.

How does he go about it?

He doesn't try to prove anything—he proclaims! Well, yes, he so structures his presentation that he's "making a case" for staying with the Lord Jesus but his "arguments" aren't arguments, they're claims on behalf of Jesus. And he makes these claims on Jesus' behalf because he is already committed to Jesus on the basis of the gospeling of eye-witnesses of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of the Lord Jesus. He doesn't demonstrate from Scripture that the Jesus they had come to believe in was indeed the Messiah. He doesn't pretend that believers carried around a card with all the predictions about the Messiah and when they met Jesus he had all those identity markers. No, like all the other believers, including the apostolic group in the beginning, they read the Scriptures in light of Jesus rather than Jesus in the light of Scriptures.

The book of Hebrews is a "sermon" addressed to people with a Jewish heritage that mattered to them.

It appears to me if we are to use the book of Hebrews well it won't do just to find out what all the verses meant and repeat them and their meaning—we must do more than exegesis. To be faithful to the Hebrew writer's purpose which is to keep believers on their feet and enriched in the gospel of and about Jesus Christ—to keep faith with that book we must use it in our setting and culture to do what he did. It isn't enough to say, "Here's what each verse means and here's how his 'argument' works for Jews."

To be faithful to that book [and any other in the Bible] we need to pay attention to the gospel sub-text which is everywhere underneath the verses in the text before us. This vast and indispensable sub-text shows itself every now and then with powerful clarity and to be faithful

to the book we are to do with it in our time and culture what the Hebrew writer did to his time and culture.

He proclaims that Jesus is a greater High Priest than any of Aaron's line [in part] because he's deathless. He doesn't develop an argument about Jesus' immortality—he preaches it [contrast it with 1 Corinthians 15:3-9].

It's right and proper that we should examine how the Hebrew writer made his case for loyalty to the Lord Jesus but we mustn't think that having worked out marvelously how he made his case to these Jews that our business is to ceaselessly repeat how he did it and leave it there. "See, that's the book of Hebrews!"

The 21st century believing Gentile might well nod in approval at our accuracy and then ask, "So what? What does a Jewish sermon have to do with us?"

WHAT THE HEBREW WRITER SAID

Many discouraged Hebrew Christians were going back to an old arrangement or period or dispensation of God.

They weren't going back to paganism or to moral chaos. They wanted to go back to what was established and authorized by God. They wanted to go back to what Moses praised and served as a faithful servant of God; back to morally ordered lives of decency and uprightness.

But in order to do that they had to go back to a place and time where Jesus Christ was not!

In order to do that they had to join the multitude that judged Jesus as a fraud and crucified him. They had to agree with their formerly bitter enemy Rome with whom they now had established a somewhat peaceful co-existence [though their Palestinian brothers and sisters suffered under the Roman consuls and governors].

They had to deny their new history as the new People of God through the "Exodus" and "return" [resurrection] of Jesus of Nazareth. They had to return to an old covenant that though in its time it had offered life to the nation it now stood in judgment on the nation for its constant covenant infidelity.

It wasn't that there was no good prior to Jesus Christ. Man and women of faith and prophetic gifts saturated their former [and true] history. It had people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jochebed, Moses, Joshua, Hannah, Samuel and David as part of a long line of God-loving heroes.

All that went before was good in its time and place. The faith of Moses or Samuel or Gideon was praiseworthy because they were faithful in their place, faithful in a way fitted to the place God gave them. The comparison wasn't between things good and bad but between the temporary and the permanent, between the shadow and the fully revealed reality, between the "earthly" and the "heavenly" and between the "flesh" and the "conscience". [When he talks about the OT tabernacle he sees it as "earthly", constructed by human hands [even though it was by God's will]. The new Tabernacle is at one and the same time the body of Jesus and the new way of relating/having access with and to God. That arrangement has been made "without hands". The city to which these believing Jews were looking was not a physical one like Jerusalem but a "heavenly" city.

What's the value of Hebrews to 21st century Gentile believers?