

The Letter to the Hebrews

Lesson 3

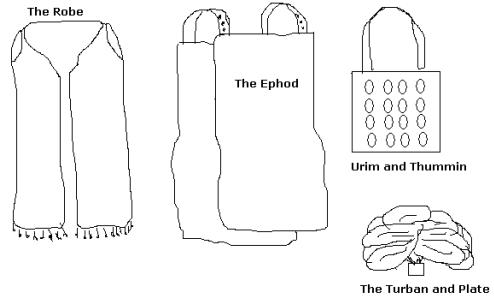
Chapter five should be part of chapters three and four. Chapter three begins with "**Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.**" Chapter four ends with "**Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.**" We should never think that Jesus cannot understand the struggles we endure because He experienced them all while here on earth. Chapter five continues the discussion concerning Jesus' work on earth as our High Priest by first explaining the Jewish system for selecting a high priest.

5:1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; **2** he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; **3** and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. **4** And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. **5** So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "THOU ART MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN THEE"; **6** just as He says also in another passage, "THOU ART A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."

Only eight-three men received the honor of holding the position of high priest in the old Mosaic system, beginning with Aaron in BC 1443 and ending with Phannias in AD 70. Once granted the honor, the high priest held the position until his death. At the death of the high priest, another worthy descendant of Aaron received the honor. At first, the position transferred at death to a descendant of Aaron's first son, Eleazar. After 290 years, the position jumped to the line of Ithamar, Aaron's fourth son. During Solomon's reign, the position returned to the line of Eleazar. After Judah's return from the Babylonian exile, Josedek of Eleazar's line became high priest. After Josedek, the high priest still came from the line of Aaron, but the length of service no longer ended at death; rather, it changed because of priestly and political pressures. An example of this policy is found in Caiaphas who held the position twice in his lifetime, once during the life of Jesus and then several years later.

The high priest wore the same garment as all priests; however, four additional items set the high priest apart from all others. First, a blue seamless, sleeveless robe, hemmed with seventy-two ornaments of pomegranates and golden bells, adorned the high priest under his ephod. Second, the fine linen ephod consisted of two pieces of material, one for the back and one for the front, held together by shoulder straps studded with two

stones, each one engraved with the six names of the tribes. Third, a breastplate filled with twelve stones comprised the Urim and Thummim. When the high priest sought guidance from the Lord, the answer came through the Urim and Thummim in a mysterious way. Fourth, a special turban made of eight yards of fine linen wrapped into a cap adorned the high priest's head. A gold plate hung from the turban, engraved with the words, "Holiness to the Lord," and secured by a blue ribbon.



The few men holding this special position as high priest through the centuries performed one special task for the good of their fellow men by entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer a blood sacrifice for the individual sins of all Israel, including himself. Entering the Holy of Holies brought great risk to the high priest. If any sin dwelt within the high priest, he would die upon entering the Holy of Holies.

Just as God selected the Jews as His chosen people, so, too, He selected Aaron as His first high priest. Following Aaron's death, a vote among His descendants chose the next high priest. Not one of the eighty-three men who held this position acquired the position on his own; other descendants of Aaron selected him to be the new high priest. Even Jesus attained His position as High Priest through the appointment by God the Father; moreover, the High Priesthood of Jesus supersedes and surpasses all eighty-three high priests of the Mosaic system. Using Psalm 110 as an example, the writer compares Jesus to Melchizedek to support His divine appointment as high priest. Chapter seven covers the following details about Melchizedek:

- He received the tithes of Abraham.
- He blessed Abraham.
- He had a permanent priesthood.
- He lives forever.
- He cannot be replaced.

The writer's intent is to prove the supremacy of Jesus as the final and ultimate High Priest who replaced the old Mosaic system.

7 In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. **8** Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. **9** And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, **10** being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

While on earth Jesus suffered the same trials and tribulations of every man. We understand the meaning of prayer for we have all had a conversation between our souls and God in our prayers. Most Christians do not understand the meaning of supplication as a special request for God to answer. Jesus offered both prayers and supplication to God the Father during His days on earth. Often He screamed His prayers as tears flowed down His face. Jesus grieved over His impending death as a human being. The Father heard each of His requests because of His reverence, caution, and fear; yet,

the plan for His death on the cross would not be changed. His perfect life and perfect sacrifice held the key to the availability of eternal salvation for every human being born on this earth. Therefore, He reigns as the eternal, living High Priest designated by God the Father to hold the position known to be held from the days of Abraham by Melchizedek.

11 Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.* **12** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. **13** For everyone who partakes *only of milk* is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. **14** But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

The writer would like to continue comparing Melchizedek to Jesus, but the immaturity of the Jewish recipients of this letter precludes any further discussion at this point. Considered babies, these Jewish Christians have failed to grow in the elementary principles of the Lord. Before they can understand the more difficult theological issues, they must let go of the former Mosaic-Judaic system of faith, embrace Jesus as God, and accept the call of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus their Savior. The writer asks the Jewish recipients to check their maturity level and accept the reality of Jesus which runs counter to the usual Jewish ideas and belief system. In the next chapter, the author leaves the elementary teachings about Jesus the Son of God and the working of the Holy Spirit to pull the Jewish Christians to maturity and away from the old Mosaic heritage ingrained within them.

6:1 Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, **2** of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. **3** And this we shall do, if God permits.

The writer assumes that the recipients of the letter consider certain beliefs to be essential to maturity.

- Repentance from dead works
- Faith toward God
- Instruction about washings
- Instruction about laying on of hands
- Instruction about the resurrection of the dead
- Instruction about eternal judgment

These six topics belong to the elementary principles of the Christian faith, yet the writer does not have time to cover them at this point in the letter. Rather, he chooses to address a major maturity problem that plagues the Jews steeped in the old Mosaic traditions.

4 For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, **5** and

have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew *them* again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

For most Christians today, this passage ranks as one of the most difficult to understand and interpret. The difficulty resides in the author's use of six phrases that only the Jewish brethren would understand.

- Once been enlightened
- Once tasted the heavenly gift
- Once partakers of the Holy Spirit
- Once tasted the good word of God
- Once tasted the powers of the age to come
- Once fallen away

Throughout this letter the author addresses the Jewish brethren in the church, seeking to make sure of their faith and trust in the new covenant delivered through Jesus Christ. He worries that some of the Jewish brethren have not forsaken the religious rituals and traditions of their past; therefore, he presents the scenario which angers and grieves the Holy Spirit. When the author states, "**once been enlightened**," the original language strongly portrays the idea of "once and for all time" seeing the truth of God." The truth of the good news has clearly been understood by the mind, heart, and soul of the hearer. Once enlightened, the hearer then has the opportunity to "**taste of the heavenly gift**." To the Jewish mind, this heavenly gift comes in the form of the grace of God to forgive their sins. The writer implies that the heavenly gift exists in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The hearer learns of Jesus and what He did for them. By the grace of God, the hearer can receive the heavenly gift of Jesus. At this point, the hearer becomes a "**partaker of the Holy Spirit**"; he enters into a conversation with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit calls all men from all the ages to accept Jesus as their Savior. The conversation between the Holy Spirit and the hearer constitutes a true spiritual experience, leading to acceptance or rejection of the Lord. The Holy Spirit calls out the "**good word of God**" to the hearer. His utterances represent the beautiful, virtuous, and valuable call to accept the Lord. Within those words the Holy Spirit reveals the "**powers of the age to come**," one of eternal bliss and one of eternal damnation. The Holy Spirit does not make the choice for the hearer; rather, the hearer makes his own choice, for all time his own eternal destination. If he rejects the call of the Holy Spirit, he has "**fallen away**." Paul makes this same point in his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 5:4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

We must never forget the context of this author's letter; the recipients are Jews who have come into the church. The author wants to make sure that they have all turned from the old Mosaic covenant and embraced the new

covenant of Jesus Christ. If, after hearing the message of Christ within the church, they still desire to be justified by the law, they have forsaken the heavenly gift of grace, denied the beautiful calling of the Holy Spirit, and chosen the works of the law instead of choosing eternity with the true Savior. Remember, the word "once" in our English versions should say, "**once and for all time**," because it represents the true meaning in the original language. The intent of the text focuses on the finality of the decision of the person to reject the calling of the Holy Spirit to accept the Lord; he has once and for all times determined never to accept the Lord, and he will die in his rejection. Jude also speaks about these people who have marked themselves for doom.

Jude 1:4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew writer suspects the presence of non-believing Jews in the church and seeks to bring them to the saving grace of the Lord. They have entered the church for various reasons, yet they have not let go of their old belief system. The church prepares the ground for the growth and maturity of those who love the Lord as their Savior. If non-believing Jews enter the church and propagate on the soil prepared for the righteous, evil and rebellious beliefs grow in contradiction to the intended purpose designed by the new covenant and the Lord.

If Jews, once and for all time, hear and reject the true message which leads to salvation, dying in their rejection of the good news, they will never again have the opportunity to receive the Lord Jesus as their Savior. If that were possible, the Lord would have to die on the cross again, and that act would mean that His original death did not complete the work of salvation He came to earth to accomplish.

This text has nothing to do with the loss of one's salvation; rather, it has everything to do with trying to obtain salvation in eternity when the time for choosing has passed. According to the Scripture, we must accept the Lord today, when we hear His voice. Yesterday cannot be reclaimed to make the choice; there are no guarantees that tomorrow will ever come. Today must be the day to accept the Lord. Rejection of the Lord and His grace today means torment and doom for all eternity.

9But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. **10**For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. **11**And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, **12**that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Turning the discussion back to the Jewish saints in the church, the author gives comfort to them, expecting them to be innocent of the accusations he

has set forth in verses four through eight. However, he wants them to be diligent in their maturing so they may experience in this life the wealth that comes by belonging to the Lord.

13For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, **14**saying, "I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU, AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU." **15**And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.

The Lord had instructed Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah and offer a sacrifice. On the mountain, Abraham laid Isaac on the altar and raised his knife to sacrifice him in accordance with the direction of God. God stopped Abraham and said the following to him:

Genesis 22:16-17 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, **17**indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

Since no one is greater than God, God pledged His promise by swearing upon His own name. To Abraham He promised the great blessing of descendants beyond any countable number. This promise came to Abraham because of his patience with God. Leaving Ur at age 60, arriving in Haran and remaining there for 15 years and finally entering Canaan at age 75, Abraham waited patiently for the direction of God. At age 100 Sarah gave Abraham a son named Isaac. Finally, when Isaac became a young man, he and his father Abraham went to Mt. Moriah where the events of this passage occurred. For more than 40 years, Abraham waited for the promises that he would be the father of many children and that they would live victorious against all enemies on earth.

16For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

Men try to imitate God, often swearing by the name of God to bring about the end of disputes. In the courtroom, the witness invokes the name of God to prove the truth of his testimony. Truth reigns except where one perjures himself under oath, bringing punishment on himself.

17In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, **18**in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us.

The promise given Abraham produced a multitude of heirs. In God's timing, He once again proclaimed His promise to the heirs when He interposed an oath. "Interposed," rarely seen in conversations today, means to act as a mediator, to sponsor, or to place oneself as a pledge. Through Jesus, God

renewed His unchangeable promise by giving His only Son as a pledge, proving His promise still stands. Both God's promise to Abraham and God's oath to Abraham's heirs stand as the two unchangeable things that should give the Jewish nation strong encouragement only if they run to the refuge of the promise and the oath. They must accept the oath pledged by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus before they can lay hold of the eternal hope of salvation.

19This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a **hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, 20**where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

The size of a ship's anchor depends on the size of the ship, but with the proper size anchor cast into the deep, caught in the mud, vegetation, and rocks, the ship can safely sit on the waters above with no fear of drifting. Once the sailor casts the anchor into the water, it quickly flees from view, but even out of sight, it holds the ship secure. Out of sight, Jesus anchors our souls to our eternal salvation. He has gone before us, preparing the way, being our High Priest who lives forever, never changing and always interceding for our needs. Through their heritage, the Jews in the church attained the blessing of being heirs of the promise given to Abraham by God, but, in order to attain the second promise, they had to place their faith and trust in God who gave Himself as an oath promising the blessed hope of salvation through Jesus Christ.