

## December 15 : Scriptures Titus 1-3, Philemon

### SUMMARY

Here we are at Paul's letter to his other "true son in the faith," Titus. Who was Titus, and what was his situation? Glad you asked.

Crete is a large island in the Mediterranean Sea, about 100 miles southwest of Greece. The island was a prosperous trade zone and business center. As you might guess, such good living conditions prompted lax morals and overindulgence in worldly things. Think New York City, Los Angeles, or Miami.

Many scholars think Paul planted this congregation after his first stint in a Roman prison (c. A.D. 62). He left behind one of his most trusted co-workers, Titus, to finish what he started, mainly establishing a stable, theologically-sound congregation with solid congregational leadership for growth and protection in an unfriendly culture.

You might refer to Titus as a Swiss Army minister because of his Greek background. He served as Paul's co-minister, travel partner, messenger, money-manager, and church plant pastor. As you read the New Covenant scriptures, Titus keeps popping up from Galatians to 2 Corinthians to 2 Timothy. Titus was quite an asset to Paul and his congregations.

Paul's letter to Titus is a concise primer for congregational life and leadership. It contains solid theology and covers a lot of ground fast and furiously. My NKJV Study Bible points out that good works are one of Paul's key themes. "There were influential people in the church who were motivated by personal interest and selfish gain (1:11). In his letter, Paul exposes the ways this was affecting the doctrine (1:11) and practice (1:16) of the church and urges Titus to champion purity, service, and kindness toward others (2:11-15; 3:3-7)" (NKJV Study Bible commentary). Paul again hammers away at the nature of salvation, and that works aren't needed to be saved but are essential after salvation to prove that we're saved. Furthermore, the believers at Crete should remember that their lives are on display in a corrupt society. We can break down the letter into four parts: Titus' ministry in Crete (1:1-16), the need for sound teaching and living (2:1-15), the need to show good works to the world (3:1-11), and Paul's parting directions (3:12-15).

Paul's letter has a typical Greek format. In his greeting to Titus, Paul calls himself a bondservant. In Bible terms, a servant is a person "who is subservient to, and entirely at the disposal of, his master; a slave." A *bondservant* is a servant who, when he has the

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option to be set free, chooses to “bind himself” to his master for life, usually out of devotion and total commitment (Exodus 21:5-6) ([gotquestions.org/bondservant.html](http://gotquestions.org/bondservant.html)).

Jesus chose Paul as His bondservant to spread the faith and “knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness” (1:1) to the Gentiles. The hope of eternal life was “promised from before time began” by our God, who cannot lie. It took time for God to unfold progressive revelation about His salvation plan, the truth which Paul now preaches.

After his greeting, Paul gets straight to the point. He left Titus in Crete to appoint elders and presents the qualifications for eldership. Paul starts with the eldership issue because elders are the theological backbone of a body of believers. Elders are supposed to know God’s word intimately so they can teach it, apply it correctly, and defend God’s truth. Elders are God’s backstop for a congregation’s spiritual health and well-being. When there’s a lack of sound leadership defending the truth, false teachers can worm their way into a community of believers with distorted doctrine and deceitful machinations to fleece the flock. The shortage of elders is the situation Titus faced.

We’ve seen the elder qualification list before in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. For me, the *foundational principle* for an elder is this: Running your house well shows how well you can be entrusted with the Father’s family. Elders are like fathers to the congregation. While no father is perfect, there are *foundational requirements* that disqualify (negatives, 1:7) and qualify (positives, 1:8) men from serving as elders. The primary responsibility of an elder is to know God’s word thoroughly, understand it sufficiently to encourage the congregation, and ably refute those who are in error (1:9).

Why does Paul hit the qualified eldership at Crete issue immediately? Because of the people described in 1:10, especially those of the circumcision party, the Judaizers who were teaching “Jesus + works” to get saved (Jesus + circumcision or Jesus + following Torah commands). Any “add-on” theology rejects the truth of salvation by faith through grace via Jesus alone. Judaizers were *believing* Jews (not non-believing Jews) who taught that Gentiles needed to adopt Jewish customs and traditions as necessary to their salvation and to become a part of Jesus’ movement, the Way, the messianic stream of Judaism.

These rebellious people whose teachings were “empty talk and deception” were the same types plaguing Pastor Timothy and his congregations. Titus’ troublemakers were causing havoc by teaching false doctrine to “get money dishonestly” (1:11). Gee, it almost sounds like some of the TV, radio, and online ministers who pitch ear-tickling teachings and beg for money.

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Before we move into 1:12-13, let me give you some backstory to the verse. According to a Cretan poet (i.e., a poet from Crete, not the slur *cretin*, a stupid person) named Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.), the people of Crete “were so much regarded as liars in the Mediterranean world, that the phrase ‘to Cretanize’ meant to lie” (NKJV Bible commentary). Therefore, Titus serves a congregation of believers on Crete, the reputed island of liars. Paul makes two points specific to Titus’ situation: 1) The troublemakers are liars and always lie, just like the Cretan’s reputation. 2) Those rebellious people and Judaizers oppose God, who cannot lie (1:2).

Because lying about God can have eternal consequences (as if lying about everything else doesn’t!), Paul tells Titus to “rebuke them sharply” (1:13). The idea is to get up in their face and soundly, abruptly, and curtly refute what they’re saying so that they’ll straighten up regarding the faith.

For all Christians who think we should only be sweet, meek, and mild in our gentle refutations of errant people – wrong! *Passion, sir, passion!* Sometimes a dangerous argument or position *must* be addressed forcefully to drive home the truth. This firm approach doesn’t mean we’re to be obnoxious. But darn it! God’s truth is far too important to argue meekly when the opponent comes at us with guns a-blazin’! Know the Bible. Know what it means, how to apply it, and how to rebuke sharply when needed to set the record straight. A little rhetorical skill also helps, like brief, hard-hitting statements and a pithy comment. Yes, mockery of the false position is suitable when appropriate. In my humble opinion, we have too many weak and ineffective apologists in today’s Christianity. We must sharpen the intellectual swords of the next generation!

Paul’s concern with those who seek to sway the Cretan congregation seems to be primarily with the Judaizers pushing Jewish myths (non-scriptural and fanciful teachings) and commands about purification and defilement. Paul says the origin of these things the Judaizers were promoting came from “those who reject the truth,” i.e., unsaved Jews who reject the truth about Jesus (1:14).

Paul lays it out clearly. For the saved person, ritual purity laws are just that – ritual. While we’ve already established that the Jerusalem Council ruled that the Gentiles could ease into practicing the Torah/Law as their guide for life, there were add-on commands from the Oral Law that were unnecessary extensions of God’s commands. Jesus dealt with this in the “eating with unwashed hands” teaching in Matthew 15:10-20. To the Cretan believers who followed God’s word, that was the measure of purity. But to the Judaizers, even what was pure they called defiled because of their errant teachings. So even if they touched or ate what God deems acceptable, their minds and consciences were violated,

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even if for no reason. Because of this, Paul says they prove by their behavior they don't belong to Jesus.

Speaking of works, Paul tells Titus what constitutes works that prove they belong to God, unlike the Judaizers above. As a reminder, let's not read the list with someone else in mind. Let's allow Paul's words to evaluate how we live, shall we?

Paul addresses the older men and women first because they are the ones who set the example for the younger believers (2:1-7). Because Titus is the congregational leader, Paul tells him to set the standard in deed (2:7) and word (2:8). This is so true for all leaders in a congregation, whether in an official capacity as elders, deacons, teachers, etc., or congregation members who claim to be mature Christians. We must set the bar by our works (2:7) and message (2:8).

Paul's guidance for slaves applies again to employee/employer relations. His call for an enslaved person's faithfulness to their master echoes a bondservant's attitude for a beloved master, fully committed to their master's will and well-being, as a demonstration of their devotion to Jesus' teaching.

In 2:11-14, Paul answers the implied "Why should we live this way?" question. Because Jesus, "the grace of God (in the flesh)," has appeared, first to teach us how to live His Father's way and deny bodily urges that compel us to satisfy our desires over the Father's will, and secondly, because Jesus *will* appear again. Jesus' return is the "blessed hope" that all believers await (the Greek sense is *with great eagerness*). His first coming was to pay the price for our sins so that we could be freed from slavery to "Torahlessness/Lawlessness" and be cleansed to rejoin our Father's family. Paul urges Titus to encourage (positive) and rebuke (negative) with firm authority and not allow anyone to blow him off, implying the false teachers and their followers were doing so.

In chapter 3, Paul turns to how the Cretan believers should behave in public, and it's not so different than within the congregation. They should submit to their leaders and act as Jesus would with their fellow citizens. Even though the unsaved people of Crete may be "foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another" (3:3), it should not be that way with Jesus' followers. When Jesus showed up, all that changed for us. By His mercy, we were saved when the Holy Spirit regenerated (lit. "again born") and renewed us (lit. "making new what has already existed").

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These two words in this verse fascinate me. There is an aspect where something is created from nothing (which is what born-again implies), for we were dead to Jesus. We're not simply reanimated spiritually. We are *recreated* spiritually. Our old nature is dead and gone, the nature that compelled us to rebel against God. We now have a new nature that can respond to God and actually *wants* to do things His way. That's the "new from nothing" aspect. The other aspect involves renovation. The Greek word is *kainos*, meaning renewing a previously existing thing. This renewal is what Paul wrote about in Romans 12:2: "Be *transformed* by the *renewing* (same word) of your mind." We are made brand new and are being renewed simultaneously by the Holy Spirit's guiding and empowering. How cool is that? And through the Holy Spirit's work, we're locked into an inheritance of eternal life. What's not to shout about?

All that said, Paul reminds Titus that our salvation is meant to produce good works (3:8). Some of those good works involve avoiding stupid and useless arguments. Paul also tells Titus to reject (to decline to receive, refuse) anyone who refuses to stop provoking divisions in the church. Sadly, I've encountered these kinds of Christians. Sometimes all we can do is let them go and walk away in peace.

Paul ends his letter with some brief housekeeping items. We read that he's in Nicopolis, reputed to be the largest city of ancient Greece situated on the Adriatic seacoast. Fun fact: "(Nicopolis) was built by the Roman emperor Octavian (Julius Caesar's adopted son and Rome's first emperor) after his victory at Aktion against Antony and Cleopatra of Egypt" in 29 B.C. and commemorated Octavian's victory over the combined forces of Marc Antony and Cleopatra ([secret-greece.com/nikopolis-ancient-city-greece](http://secret-greece.com/nikopolis-ancient-city-greece)). Hence, the meaning of the city's name is "City of the Victors" or "Victory City."

Paul tells Titus that after he installs the eldership team on Crete, Titus should come to Nicopolis to help him. In the meantime, Titus should help two others, Zenas and Apollos, on their journey. Apollos is Paul's co-worker, a skilled preacher Aquila and Priscilla took under their wings (Acts 18:24). Zenas is a lawyer (Greek, *nomikos*). "A *nomikos* was a learned man skilled in the interpretation of Roman or Jewish law. Most likely Zenas was an expert in the Jewish Torah" ([biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Zenas](http://biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Zenas)). Ah! This makes sense. Apollos and Zenas are helping Titus by explaining and preaching God's word. At the same time, Titus oversees administrative matters, such as setting leaders in place to carry on the work after the three men leave. Got it!

Finally, Paul reiterates how important it is for the Cretan believers to demonstrate their faith through good works. After all, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17).

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Now let's *cruise* into the book of Philemon (*fil-ay'-mone*, "one who kisses"). Paul writes this private letter to his friend whose slave, Onesimus (*on-ay'-sim-os*, "profitable or useful"), has escaped, found Paul, and has become born again. Paul sends Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, to make restitution and resume his service to his master/brother in Christ.

Onesimus' conversion has changed the relationship equation. Onesimus shouldn't be viewed as a runaway slave but as a beloved brother in the Lord who is again "employed" in Philemon's service. This change would take some adjusting to and require forgiveness and complete restoration to his place, along with his new status as a believer. Do we sometimes struggle to adjust to those we've known for so long who recently become Jesus' followers? It's kind of weird, especially if it's one's spouse or close family member.

Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this, but it's unclear where he was imprisoned, whether in house arrest or the Roman dungeon. But he uses his situation to say he's a "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (1:1), for Jesus' sake. We know Timothy is with Paul because Paul includes him in the greeting. While Paul addresses his letter specifically to Philemon, it's to be shared with "Apphia our sister (Philemon's wife?), to Archippus, our fellow soldier (Philemon's son?), and to the church that meets in your home" (1:2). This information is crucial because Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a fellow believer and graciously restore him to household service. While it was acceptable to mistreat enslaved people under Roman law, it was not okay to mistreat Jesus' spiritual kin. Therefore, once they hear Paul's letter, *every* believer who is a part of Philemon's home church must make sure Philemon follows through and treat Onesimus well, given Onesimus' change of heart.

Paul launches into a great affirmation of Philemon's love and faith for his fellow believers. He lets Philemon know he is praying for his faith to be energized and active and how encouraged he is by Philemon's ministry to his fellow believers (1:4-7).

Do you see what Paul's doing? He's preparing Philemon for his request.

Paul: "Hey, Philemon. Since this is who you are and how you treat your fellow Christians, I ask that you treat your runaway slave equally since he's pledged his life to Jesus."

Philemon: "What? Really? Well, that certainly changes things."

Paul tells Philemon that although he *could* command him to receive Onesimus back graciously and treat him well, as a prisoner and elderly man, Paul appeals to Philemon

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based on love to do so (1:8). “Surprise, Philemon! Your runaway slave came to the Lord and is now my son in the faith,” writes Paul (1:9). Furthermore, Paul makes a pun on Onesimus’ name. “Where he was once Mr. Profitable/Useful was *profitless/useless* to you, now he’s really Mr. Profitable/Useful to both of us via his faith in Jesus” (1:11). Clever, huh?

Paul supports Onesimus by telling Philemon that as a dear son in the faith, Paul could have retained Onesimus’ services “*so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place.*” Well played, Paul. As the NKJV Study Bible says, “Paul wanted to keep Onesimus in Rome, helping with the ministry, confident that Philemon would approve. Onesimus had been serving Paul instead of Philemon, giving Paul the aid Philemon could not.” Paul isn’t pulling rank. He’s speaking respectfully to a fellow believer, asking for his permission, although he could appeal to his apostolic authority. He defers the decision to Philemon so that it is a willful decision and not forced (1:14).

Paul sees God’s hand in the unpleasant situation leading to the letter. God allowed Onesimus to flee and find Paul, where he thought the apostle would help him gain his freedom. Onesimus sure found freedom – in Jesus! Even though he was still a slave, Onesimus could return and faithfully serve two masters, Jesus and Philemon, if his earthly master would forgive him.

Paul appeals to Philemon to treat Onesimus more as a brother than a slave/servant/employee and to welcome him as Philemon would Paul (1:17). He even offers to pay for any expenses Philemon incurred in the whole runaway slave affair. But Paul pokes Philemon about it too. “Sure, I’ll take care of any debts he has, not that I’m going to mention any debt you owe me for sharing the Gospel and you gaining eternal life, Philemon. Just sayin’.” In other words, “If you will, Philemon, let it slide.”

Paul ends with his stated expectation that Philemon will do the right thing, precisely what Paul has asked for, and to prepare a guest room in anticipation that he will be released from imprisonment (1:21-22). Paul signs off with his usual salutations from a fellow believer and his church planting team.

## INSIGHT

Yes, Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth, of things seen and unseen, of all beings and inanimate things. “For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17)

That's why it's so striking that Jesus is called a servant. Isaiah prophesied four Servant Songs "that describe the service, suffering, and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah... The Servant Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-9; Isaiah 49:1-13; Isaiah 50:4-11; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12" ([gotquestions.org/Servant-Songs.html](http://gotquestions.org/Servant-Songs.html)).

Jesus is not only the quintessential Lord but also the Father's quintessential Servant. He is our model. If the Lord of Lords will humble Himself to serve and bless others, we should do the same (John 13:14-15).

But I see a special amazing thing in Jesus being a servant. A bondservant is a person who willingly chooses to surrender his life out of love and devotion to his master. The servant will often do this if he is married because if he leaves, his wife may remain in servitude depending on the situation (the master has given him a wife, Exodus 21:4). Therefore, out of devotion to his master and love for his wife, a servant may choose to become a bondservant, "bound" to his master for life (Exodus 21:5-6). Yes, a perpetual servant until he dies.

The Bible tells us that although Jesus is God, He humbled Himself and took on the form of a servant for our sakes, "taking on the likeness of humanity" (Philippians 2:7). Jesus not only took on the form of a servant, He functioned as a servant, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

That means as a servant, Jesus became a servant to His Father so He could do His assigned work of salvation through which we become part of the bride of Christ (John 3:29; Revelation 19:7). When Jesus rose from the grave, He wasn't in His pre-incarnation body. He was still in a human body that was glorified, perfect, and completely free from the effects of sin. Even though Jesus can do things with His body that we limited human beings can't for now, Jesus is still limited to one place at a time as far as the Bible shows. That's why He sent His Spirit so He can be with every person while being limited physically, so to speak. Are you tracking with me?

Jesus now sits in one place – at His Father's right hand – *still with His glorified body, a physical body that can exist in a spiritual environment*. When Jesus returns, He will do it with this same glorified body. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us that Jesus will shed that glorified body for an unlimited eternal spiritual existence.



So, can it be said that Jesus became a bondservant for our sakes, bound in a glorified human body for eternity in eternal service to His Father for the sake of the Bride He loves? The thought is overwhelming!

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## December 16 : Scriptures Hebrews 1-5

### SUMMARY

When it comes to parts of the Bible that are tough to understand, I think the book of Hebrews is right up there with the books of Revelation and Daniel. The reason is simple for all three. They're written with a distinctly Jewish perspective which requires knowing the Jewish context of the early Christian community.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, non-believing and messianic Jews understood their apocalyptic literature "that foretells supernaturally inspired cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. A product of the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalyptic literature is characteristically pseudonymous; it takes narrative form, employs esoteric language, expresses a pessimistic view of the present, and treats the final events as imminent" ([britannica.com/art/apocalyptic-literature](http://britannica.com/art/apocalyptic-literature)). In other words, apocalyptic literature relies heavily on how Jews understood the pictures and ideas that veiled the meaning, so outsiders (non-Jews) didn't understand what was written about how the End Times would go down.

While the book of Hebrews isn't End Time literature, it's still heavily steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and the ancient Israelite/Jewish context. To grasp Hebrews, we need to know about the Torah/Law, the Temple, the sacrificial system, the nature of sin and how God forgives and cleanses the person who stepped over the line, what it means to be pure and impure, the person of Melchizedek, and how Jesus fits into all of this.

The early church was rapidly approaching a crossroads. Gentiles were joining the messianic Jewish movement called the Way, whose leader was (and is) not only Jewish but God Himself. The battle from the start was how the community would retain its Jewish foundation with all the Gentiles streaming in who had a tiny frame of reference to the Hebrew scriptures, Jewish history, and Judaism.

I see the book of Hebrews primarily as a way to 1) speak to Jewish people about Jesus and how He's the fulfillment of everything God had promised for over 1,500 years, 2) reaffirm the Jewishness of the Way, and 3) reach out to Gentiles to bring them across the traditional Jew/Gentile line into a faith that makes all people, Jew or Gentiles, new people through Jesus regardless of ethnicity.

With persecution rising in Rome, first against the Jews and then the messianic community, believing Jews and Gentiles needed each other. Sadly, two fractures in A.D. 70 (First Jewish Revolt against Rome) and 135 (Second Jewish Revolt – the Bar Kochba

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Rebellion) caused an immense and antagonistic rift between the Jewish community and the messianic Jewish movement named Christianity. But what we see in our day is a work of God where He's moving both sides closer together. Christians are increasingly curious about our Jewish roots because it helps us understand more powerfully what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have done for us. Many in the Jewish community are watching and marveling that Christians are standing up for them in ways that haven't been seen in millennia, openly repudiating and asking forgiveness for the sins of our Christian ancestors.

I've been involved in this movement for over thirty-five years, and because of that, the book of Hebrews speaks to me more loudly than I ever knew. I'll try to go *Cruisin' Through The Bible* with you without smothering you with theology or academic language. That's my *goal*. It doesn't mean I won't dip my toe into theological waters here and there because Hebrews is a deep book expressing profound truths that believers *must* understand.

Who wrote Hebrews? No one knows. Even though the early church said Paul did, the book's style differs greatly from Paul's letters. Hebrews earned its place in the Bible, not by virtue of Paul's authorship but on its theological truths. Many scholars believe Hebrews was written in 64 A.D. before the Christian persecution ignited under Nero.

To whom was it written? Because Hebrews 13:24 says, "Those who are from Italy send you greetings," it's supposed the author was writing to believers in Rome or Italy or to dispersed believing Jews who had been driven from Rome under Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54).

One of the critical themes of Hebrews is Jesus' superiority. He is superior to angels, He brought a superior salvation as the perfect man, He's greater than Moses, and among the people of Israel, He's the superior High Priest, and is as unique as the King-Priest, Melchizedek of Salem (Jerusalem). Jesus has introduced the New Covenant, which is superior to the Older Covenant, and our only proper response to Him is faith, to trust Jesus (NKJV Study Bible outline).

*However*, just because Jesus is *superior* to all these things, don't assume Jesus is their *replacement*. I believe it's best to regard Jesus as their *ultimate expression* and *fulfillment* of the Father's plan, as it was unrolled from the beginning. Don't think you can eject, overrule, ignore, or erase the Jewishness of our spiritual heritage. To do so would be to undercut the foundation of our faith and destroy the elements that created the pictures which explain who Jesus is and what His Father sent Him to do. So when you see, "he became superior to the angels" (1:4) or a better hope (7:19) and covenant (7:22), or Jesus

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as a greater High Priest (10:21), don't assume *replacement* or *cancelation*. The spiritual elements that brought people near to God under the Older Covenant find their finest fulfillment and effectiveness through Jesus, who brings us near His Father's throne (7:19, 10:22, 11:6).

How are we to respond? 1) We must make sure we know Jesus for who He is and what He's done for us and hold tightly to that, and 2) live our faith as we grow to spiritual maturity. Simple, right?

So let's begin. As you read, keep this in mind. You're reading a letter from a messianic Jew to a born-again Jewish audience steeped in Judaism and Jewish worship. The author's goal is to focus them on Jesus and encourage them not to abandon their faith in Him. If they reject Jesus and return to the Older Covenant ways, they'll miss God's only acceptable way of salvation under the New Covenant, the renovated Older Covenant, Covenant 2.0. Gentile believers are beneficiaries of this message, but seemingly not the author's primary concern.

The esteemed brokerage, E. F. Hutton, had a commercial in the 1970s with the tag line, "When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen." Why? *Authority*. E. F. Hutton has been around since 1904, and their wise investment practices earned them respect for their wisdom and results. The author of Hebrews says the same thing about God.

In chapter 1, the author says God has spoken much through His prophets. But now He's said His final word through His Living Word, the fullest expression of who He is – Jesus, the God who created all things, who in His human form accomplished His work of opening the door to our salvation and now sits down in heaven at His Father's right hand. Say, did I mention theology? 1:1-3 is packed with it!

So, why does the author write all this at the start? To establish Jesus as superior to everything in God's creation and because Judaism has a cosmology (understanding the universe and how it works) of the seen and unseen realms that include God and other spiritual beings, angels (God's messengers), and others (cherubim, seraphim). Some high-level spiritual beings are extremely powerful, such as Michael (Daniel 10:13) and an unnamed angel who can single-handedly arrest and imprison Satan (Revelation 20:1-3). Yup. Jesus is greater than all spiritual beings even though He humbled Himself to become a part of the human race who (at this time) are "lower" than the angels. But when Jesus was done with His work, His Father placed Jesus above all spiritual beings in authority and power. Therefore, when Jesus talks, people should listen (1:2).

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In the rest of chapter 1, the author uses Hebrew scripture quotes to back up why we should listen to Jesus. He is the Father's Son, and no angel is. Angels, God's fiery servants, worship Jesus. Worship belongs to God alone. Jesus is exalted as His Father's designated ruler (1:8-9), the One who existed before the world's creation and will continue to rule after the current world "wears out like clothing" (1:10-12). No angel is pre-existent and eternal. Only God is. Therefore, *Jesus as God is superior to the angels and all spiritual beings*, but notice He doesn't replace them. Keep that principle in mind.

I especially like verses 13-14. Jesus is superior to angels because He sits as Ruler of the Universe, while angels are His "go-fers" who work on our behalf. Spoiler alert! There's a time coming when we will be exalted above angels and spiritual beings (1 Corinthians 6:3) because we will rule and reign with Jesus as our Elder Brother.

Chapter 2 is the natural segue via "For this reason" (2:1). Why should we pay attention to all we've heard? Because God has spoken to us through Jesus, and if we don't listen (i.e., the Jewish idea of hearing *and* obeying), we risk drifting away from Him. And if God's people, the Israelites, were held to strict accountability under the Older Covenant, how much more are we held accountable to the superior New Covenant through which we're saved (2:2)? Jesus spoke about it and "it was confirmed to us by those who heard him" (2:3) This gives us a clue that the author is a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation disciple who learned about Jesus from the original disciples. So, it could be Paul. Furthermore, not only did Jesus speak, but the Holy Spirit confirmed His words through signs, miracles, and wonders (2:4), and since that's the case, why wouldn't we expect the Holy Spirit to do the same today when we proclaim the Gospel?

What you just read through was the first of five exhortations the author gives to his readers. "Listen up!" (2:1-4).

The author returns to Jesus as God's Son, exalted above the angels, yet Jesus is also human. The term Son of Man speaks of Jesus' human nature that can exist in the supernatural realm (Daniel 7:13-14), so the emphasis here is on Jesus as a human being.

Now follow me. In Daniel 7, we see a divine human being (Jesus) in heaven with the enthroned Ancient of Days (the Father). The Father gives Jesus all authority and power as the Son of Man to launch His Father's kingdom over the world, i.e., putting down the "little horn" (Daniel 7:8, the Antichrist) and setting up the Messianic Reign on His Father's behalf. So what we see in Daniel 7 is that Jesus holds all authority and power (now) and then executes His mission to establish His Father's dominion on Earth (not yet). This picture is what the Hebrews author is telling us. Although Jesus made Himself

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lower than the angels to accomplish His work on the cross, He is now crowned with glory and honor (2:7-8), and even though everything is subject to Him, not everything has been subjugated yet (2:8-9).

Jesus became human *so that He could die as an equivalent sacrifice for all of a person's sins*. We now see how Jesus is superior to the Older Covenant, where only animal blood could take care of sin. Under the Older Covenant, animal blood *covered* sin, allowing a repentant person to come *closer* to God. Under the New Covenant, Jesus' blood *erases* sin so that a forgiven person can come close to God's immediate presence, not just closer to it. See the difference?

The author's point is that Jesus *had* to become human to bring many sons and daughters to glory/salvation (2:10). As the only God-in-the-flesh person, Jesus was the perfect one to pioneer perfect salvation, which He did by Him suffering death. The result is Jesus is not only our Savior and future King. He's our brother, the kinsman-redeemer, who buys our freedom and restores us to our Father's family. How cool is it that the Sovereign of the Universe is also our older brother? Only as a human being could Jesus accomplish His work as our one-for-one sacrifice (2:14-16).

Before going further, we must talk about the Older Covenant sacrificial service. Two things were needed to help a person atone for their sin and get cleared of their guilt for sins committed. There must be a *sacrifice* to take the mandated punishment (die in their place as a substitute) and a *High Priest* to go through the process of slaughtering the animal, dabbing or splashing its blood on the Bronze Altar (daily) or in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement (yearly). Jesus not only had to become human to be our *Perfect Sacrifice* (2:14) but also to serve simultaneously as our *Perfect High Priest* (2:17). See how perfect that is?

Another great benefit for us is when Jesus became human, He experienced the suffering via temptations we all experience in life and so can not only identify with us in our struggles but has the wisdom and power to help us through them (2:18). This just keeps getting better and better!

In chapter 3, the author begins to tie pictures together. Regarding the spiritual truths we embrace, Jesus is the One His Father sent (Apostle, *Apostolos*, a sent one). Yes, Jesus was on a mission from God (hat tip to the movie *The Blues Brothers*). Jesus is also our High Priest who performs the sacrifice for us. The author now connects Jesus with Moses because God sent them both to rescue God's people from a tyrant's kingdom and bring them to God.

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Further, both Moses and Jesus watched over God's house, His people. While Moses served as a faithful *servant* to "build God's house," Jesus is the *Son* who is greater than the servant, overseeing the servant *and* all of God's household. Therefore, Jesus is superior to Moses.

And now we reach the second of the five exhortations: "Stay faithful and obey so you can enter God's rest/eternal life!" (3:7-19). The author points to the disobedient ancient Israelites who were punished for their faithlessness. When the Israelites walked with God in the Wilderness, they were held accountable to the covenant laws and commands they agreed on at Mt. Sinai. We all know what happened when they refused to hear (listen and obey). God refused to allow them into "My rest," the Promised Land (3:7-11; Psalm 95:7-11). The author's point is that things are more severe regarding salvation under the New Covenant. If we refuse to listen to Jesus and abandon Him because of an "evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God," we lose more than land. We risk losing our eternal lives, so we must encourage each other to hang in there and not surrender to sin that hardens us against God (3:13). According to the author, those who remain faithful through death make it. Sin, disobedience, and unbelief will sink you.

In chapter 4, the author talks more about God's promised rest to come, comparing it to the Israelites reaching the Promised Land and those who didn't and fell short of their goal because they didn't trust the Lord. The author is warning his readers about turning back from Jesus to the ways of the Older Covenant. He uses the sad examples of the Older Covenant to encourage them not to abandon Jesus. If they turn from faith in Jesus, they won't enter God's intended and final rest, life with Him, even though God did everything He planned to set up salvation from before the beginning (4:1-3).

The author then equates our eternal rest with God not to the Promised Land this time but to the last day of the week, the Sabbath, a time to rest and rejoice in the Lord (4:4-11). While the messianic Jews continued to celebrate the weekly Sabbath, the author points out a superior Sabbath that's coming if they remain faithful and trust Jesus. And don't think God can't figure out who is with Him and who isn't. His word reveals our actual state (4:12-13).

So now that we have that covered and know that we can't hide anything from the Lord, let's thank Him for providing us with a divine High Priest who not only perfectly understands all the garbage we go through and our temptation, but He clears the way so we can "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (4:16) when we approach Him in prayer to ask for His help in all things, especially when we're tempted to give in or turn away.

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At the end of the last chapter, the author talked about the superior rest we look forward to and references Jesus as our High Priest. In chapter 5, he expands on *how* a High Priest functions and *why* Jesus is superior to all of Israel's High Priests.

A High Priest stands between God and His people as an intermediary. A High Priest represents God to the people and the people to God (5:1). The High Priest is of the people, alongside the people, and for the people. Being human, the High Priest can graciously and sympathetically help those he serves because he understands what they're going through (5:2). He's subject to the same weaknesses (temptation and sin) that his charges are. Therefore, he has to make sacrifices on his own behalf to continue serving as High Priest (5:3). Finally, becoming a High Priest wasn't a volunteer position. When God set up the sacrificial system for Israel with the High Priestly family (Aaron's clan) and assisting priests (Levites), He *chose them* for service to Him (Exodus 28:1, Leviticus 4:1-3).

The above describes how Jesus functions as our High Priest in many ways. The only difference is that Israel's High Priests from ancient days through Jesus' day were confined to Aaron's family line within the tribe of Levi. No exceptions. However, Jesus isn't from Levi's family. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. *So, how does that work?*

Before there was a Levitical line of Aaronic High Priest, *firstborn sons* served as God's priesthood ("priests") as well as family leaders ("kings"). In the Golden Calf episode, God changed from firstborn sons to the tribe of Levi as priests because they proved themselves faithful and were willing to put God first, even before their relatives. As God, that's His choice, *but it doesn't mean He can't choose a new High Priest Himself*. The Father's sovereign choice is why the writer points out that scripture even prophesied of a new High Priest, "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:4). What is the order of Melchizedek? Simple. *Melchizedek is God's choice of a firstborn son to serve Him*.

Why Melchizedek? Check out the Cruisin' Through The Bible comments on Genesis 14 for more explanation. Long story short, Melchizedek is a *title*, not a name. Melchizedek means "King of Righteousness" or "Righteous King." He was "a priest to God Most High" (Genesis 14:8). After the Flood, Noah was the oldest firstborn son alive. Therefore, Noah alone was qualified to serve as God's High Priest over the entire world, which he did (Genesis 8:20).

After Noah died, God likely chose Noah's firstborn son, Shem, as the next High Priest, and if you do the biblical generation math, Shem was still alive when Abraham met the King of Righteousness, Shem. *What?* Yes! Shem lived for 600 years (Genesis 11:10-11).



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Shem was 465 years old when Abraham was 75. Since the Abraham-Melchizedek account is before Isaac was born, Abraham was between 75 and 99 years old, and Melchizedek was 465 and 489. *As Noah's firstborn son and oldest living member of the human race, Shem is God's preeminent High Priest of his day. God likely chose Shem after his father, Noah, died. And isn't it exciting that God's King of Righteousness ruled as king in Salem and served as High Priest in the future city of Jerusalem?* It fits the theological picture the writer of Hebrews paints.

So, that's what it means for Jesus to be after the order of Melchizedek. As His Father's firstborn Son, Jesus was chosen to be the final High Priest regarding sacrifice for sin and cleansing under the New Covenant. And since Melchizedek appears "out of nowhere" in Genesis 14 and nothing is said of his death, there was the idea that Melchizedek was a unique High Priest *who never died*. The writer of Hebrews links Jesus with that tradition. Jesus is God's firstborn High Priest who came from nowhere and lives forever. Since Jesus can't die, he remains "a priest *forever* according to the order (*firstborn son*) of Melchizedek" (5:6).

I especially appreciate Jesus as a man because it says He has experienced everything we have as human beings, including temptation and the challenge of always obeying God. Even though all people fail, Jesus remained perfectly sinless. Sometimes I really need to hear that! Though nobody may understand what I'm going through – difficulties and temptations – and how they hit me, Jesus knows. He knows exactly how I can get through them because He did. Jesus used His suffering under temptation to establish and prove His sinlessness, thus qualifying Himself as "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (the superior sacrifice) and the superior High Priest per the Melchizedek model (5:8-10).

"But Writer Of Hebrews, all this theology is tough to understand!" Yes, he knew that. What he's just explained are foundational, crucial truths that *every* Christian should know and embrace. But those reading this letter have apparently become lax in pressing into the scriptures to understand these things. Even though they've had enough teaching to be workers "who (don't) need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (1 Timothy 2:15), some of them need a refresher course (5:12). But even that's not an excuse because the newest believer can grasp the so-called challenging theology. It's those who practice what they've learned who are the ones who mature spiritually. Practice makes perfect, or should I say *practice grows perfection*?

This last section of chapter 5 through the first three verses of chapter 6 is the third of the writer's five exhortations. So far, they are, "Listen up" (2:1-4), "Stay faithful and obey so you can enter God's rest/eternal life!" (3:7-19), and now, "Keep growing up!" (5:11-6:3).

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**INSIGHT**

I know what the Calvinists say about never being able to lose our salvation. "The biblical teaching is that God has done something; God is doing something; and God will do something. The God who starts is the God who finishes" ([ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-is-perseverance-of-the-saints](http://ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-is-perseverance-of-the-saints)).

*And yet*, the writer of Hebrews repeatedly warns his fellow Christians of what appears to be losing one's salvation by turning from God (2:1, 3; 3:1, 7-19; 4:1, 6, 11).

It's true. God (Jesus) is the *subject* of salvation, the one who makes it happen, and we are the *object* of salvation, the people to whom salvation happens.

But you can't get away from the above verses. To confirm their doctrine, Reformed Theologians declare that those who fall away from God must have never believed in Jesus to the point of being saved. But what about 3:1, 12-14, "Therefore, holy *brothers and sisters*, who share in a heavenly calling... Watch out, *brothers and sisters*, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception. For we have become participants in Christ *if we hold firmly until the end the reality that we had at the start.*"

So here are my observations:

- 1) "Brothers and sisters" only applies to fellow believers. Biblically speaking, a believer would never rightly call an unbeliever a brother or sister in the salvation sense. Therefore, the writer's readers are definitely saved.
- 2) The writer says specifically that they share in a heavenly calling. That refers to salvation, which means his readers are saved like the writer.
- 3) If someone isn't saved, their evil, unbelieving heart can turn them away from the living God. *But the writer isn't talking to unsaved people. He's addressing fellow believers.*
- 4) In the context of addressing believers, the writer warns them to "hold firmly until the end (death) the reality (salvation) that we had at the start. In other words, if you don't hold onto Jesus to the point of death, it's apparent you can lose the reality you had at the start, i.e., salvation.

Am I missing something here?

Having been a part of two Reformed Theology congregations, I've heard a lot of discussions and hammering over the "once saved, always saved" doctrine. On the other hand, most Arminianists don't find it necessary to hit this theological doctrine so hard so often. Why? Because they believe a person can turn from God and miss the eternal rest that salvation brings them. Therefore, they focus on remaining faithful, not fighting over whether a faithful person can lose what they've been given. Yes, Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). Yes, no one can *take* someone from Jesus, but can a person *walk* out of Jesus' hand as the writer of Hebrews seems to say.

I'll let you decide.

But the crucial point between the two theological camps puts this discussion to rest: "Stay tight with Jesus," as the first three exhortations say.

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## December 17 : Scriptures Hebrews 6-9

### SUMMARY

In chapters 1-2, Jesus is shown to be superior to all angels (spiritual beings). Therefore, if the message about how to have a relationship with God through the Old Covenant that came from God and was delivered by angels (Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19) was binding, how much more binding is the message about how to have a relationship with God through the Old Covenant spoken by its Author, Jesus?

In chapter 3, Jesus is shown as superior to Moses. Moses was a servant in God's house, by Jesus is the Son. Therefore, we'd better listen to the message of salvation today and hold onto it forever.

In chapters 4-5, Jesus provides a more superior "rest" than the Sabbath. The Sabbath is physical, but the coming "Sabbath rest" is eternal life with God. Jesus is also the superior High Priest by virtue of His humanity, being made perfect by His absolute and faultless obedience.

The writer of Hebrews would like to go deeper, but sadly, he tells his audience that they're still too spiritually immature to grasp more profound truths. Despite that, they are mature enough to leave elementary teachings about Jesus (theology and practices) and dive deeper (6:1-3). That leads us to chapters 6-9.

Fine! Since I ended yesterday's entry about the nature of salvation, let's address the elephant in the room again. Calvinists (those who follow Swiss Reformation theologian John Calvin, 1509–1564) say that once a person is saved, they can't lose their salvation. Arminianists (those who follow Dutch Reformation theologian Jacobus Arminius, 1560–1609) say a born-again Christian can commit apostasy ("to stand away"), abandon their faith in Jesus, and lose their salvation. It certainly seems like we can lose our salvation based on what the writer says, "For it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened, who tasted the heavenly gift, who shared in the Holy Spirit, who tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, and who have fallen away" (6:4-6). Is that an actual thing, or is that simply an example of what would happen to a believer if it *could* happen?

Walking away from God and losing one's relationship with Him was undoubtedly an option under the Older Covenant. The Older Covenant was sealed imperfectly (with animal blood), and God's Torah/Law was written externally on stone tablets and parchment. The Hebrew scriptures have multiple examples of Israelites who walked

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away from God and were cut off from the nation. But is that possible under the New Covenant? Let's look at what Hebrews says more closely.

First, the New Covenant was sealed by a perfect sacrifice – Jesus' blood. Since Jesus' humanity is superior to animals, His sacrifice is perfect for a single death to atone for a person's sin. Second, the New Covenant comes with upgrades; 1) We receive a resurrected and reactivated spirit to reconnect us to God Himself via the resident Holy Spirit, who serves as our interface with the Father. 2) God's Torah/Laws are now written inside of us. We *want* to obey our Father and can like we never could before. So with the combination of personal resurrection and restoration, can we lose that? Again, some say yes, and some say no.

What's the writer's point? *Let's not risk it.* He warns his readers not to reject Jesus or scorn His offer of salvation. Only those who trust Jesus will gain eternal life; the time to do it is now (today). 6:4-8 is the writer's description of what it is like for a person if they do (per Arminianists) or could (per Calvinists) turn from Jesus.

But the writer reassures his audience (*whew!*). They're doing well, and the Father won't forget it. Their part is to demonstrate their faith through active obedience until the end as those who will inherit God's promises (6:9-12).

And how will they persevere? Through God's faithfulness to His covenant promises to them. The writer likens the Father's commitment to His New Covenant with them to the Father's covenant vows and commitment to Abraham (6:13-17). When God makes promises, He doesn't lie. *God can't lie.* So when God made His one-sided covenant promise to Abraham, He didn't make Abraham swear because people are notorious for breaking promises. Instead, God swore by Himself via His word and oath (two unchangeable things, 6:18), making His covenant with Abraham irrevocable. Everything the Father promised Abraham, He will do. Likewise, we have the Father's promise, His word, and His oath that through Jesus' work as a High Priest (like Melchizedek), we can rest in the hope of eternal life through being saved from eternal death.

Speaking of the High Priest Melchizedek, the writer now pans the camera from God's superior New Covenant promise to Jesus' superiority as Israel's High Priest. Remember, God's priests were initially the firstborn sons of the nation of Israel. But when Israel sinned with the Golden Calf right after signing the Older Covenant at Sinai, God rejected Israel's firstborn as priests and selected the tribe of Levi as His priests. That was because they stood up for God's honor and were willing to punish their kin for getting out of control (Exodus 32:25-29). The Lord selected Aaron (the Levite and Moses' brother) to

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start the family line of High Priests. From then on, all priests and the High Priest were of Levi's tribe.

However, God had a High Priest that preceded them all, Melchizedek. Melchizedek's name means "Righteous King." He was king over Salem (future Jerusalem), and he served as God's High Priest (Genesis 14:18). Since Melchizedek lived long before Levi's ancestors were a sparkle in his eye, Melchizedek was the firstborn son family ruler and priest. As said before, since Melchizedek lived so soon after Noah, there's a great case to be made that Melchizedek's name was a title, and this person was Noah's son, Shem, the firstborn son of the firstborn son (Noah) who saved a remnant of humanity via the Ark.

So this is where the writer is going. Since the Father chose to move the priesthood from firstborn sons to the tribe of Levi, He has the right to move it back to His Firstborn Son, Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is a High Priest like Melchizedek and doesn't have to qualify for the position as a Levite. The writer makes further comparisons to show that Jesus is superior to the line of Aaronic High Priests, but it's metaphorical, based on Genesis 14. It might be good to go back and read that before continuing.

Finished? Good.

What connections does the writer make between Jesus and Melchizedek in chapter 7? 1) Abraham honored Melchizedek via a tithe, recognizing the Priest-King's superiority. 2) Melchizedek is ID'd as a king of righteousness and peace. Nothing is said about Melchizedek's lineage in Genesis 14, so in a remarkable interpretation, he was "without father, mother, or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (7:3). Do you see what the writer is setting up? He's saying Jesus is of a higher honor than the Aaronic High Priest, Jesus is the embodiment of righteousness and peace, both of which He gives to us, and Jesus is the everlasting High Priest, the Son of God. Why is this important?

Because of the difference between the Older and New Covenant priesthood and sacrifices. The Older Covenant priesthood with its High Priest was imperfect, staffed with imperfect, sinful people. God's plan involved producing another High Priest and priesthood, free from sin. Jesus is that High Priest, and we are the priests who interact with the Father (Revelation 1:6, 5:10).

But Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. He can't serve as a High Priest *unless the Father changes the "law," the familial qualifications, regarding who can serve as His High Priest* (7:13-14). According to Melchizedek's pattern, the Father reverted to the precedent set by

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His choice of a man to serve Him (7:12, 15). The old requirement was by family descent, but the new condition is based on an indestructible life (7:16). Jesus was designated His Father's High Priest, He sacrificed Himself and died, He rose from the dead (a resurrected High Priest), and lives forever as His Father's everliving and everlasting High Priest. There will be no other High Priests than Jesus because a High Priest has to die for a successor to take his place. No death = no successor (7:23-24). Therefore, Jesus is "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (7:17, quoted from Psalm 110:4). God even told us the change would happen ahead of time!

So again, under the New Covenant, Jesus' High Priesthood is superior to the line of Aaronic High Priests under the Older Covenant, which makes the New Covenant superior to the Older Covenant (7:22). Furthermore, as eternal High Priest, Jesus' service of atonement and intercession is far more effective than the previous High Priest's service (7:24-25).

Even though the Father called Israel's priests to serve Him, they still needed to sacrifice for their sins and infractions. But since Jesus is perfect and sinless, proven by His absolute obedience, Jesus never has to make atonement for personal sins (7:26-28). He is the sinless High Priest and the perfect, unblemished, sinless Sacrifice.

Imagine that! We have a perfect High Priest who can erase our sins, remove the penalty, and keep us tight with God forever!

Chapter 7 draws to a close with the writer telling us what kind of High Priest we need to do this: "This is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (7:26), an excellent description of Jesus' flawless state. Chapter 8 opens with "and we have that kind of High Priest" (8:1), and He serves in heaven, the actual sanctuary and tabernacle of which the Tabernacle and Temple on Earth were just copies (8:2).

*What?* Yes! The Tabernacle and Temple accurately picture God's throne room in the unseen realm! God showed Moses the layout of His throne room on Mount Sinai (8:5), and Moses built it for the sacrificial service to be performed by the priesthood so sins could be covered and God's people could draw near to Him.

But since sins could only be *covered* under the Older Covenant and not *erased* as they are under the New Covenant, and human priests certainly couldn't enter God's heavenly throne room to do their work, *the Father had Moses recreate His throneroom on earth in which*

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*sins could be addressed, and God and His people could meet with a High Priest acting as the go-between.*

Then came Jesus and the New Covenant. Jesus completed His earthly work as High Priest and perfect Sacrifice on earth. After He rose, He, as High Priest, presented Himself as the Ultimate Sacrifice for Sin before His Father's very throne in heaven to seal the New Covenant. Anyone who answers God's call for salvation enters that New Covenant. There's no longer any need to sacrifice (kill) anything to deal with sin because the effect of Jesus' sacrifice continues as long as He lives – which is forever! Jesus' High Priestly duties are now about praying for every saved person as their God-given Intercessor (7:25).

Since Jesus is His Father's perfect High Priest and His service to His Father is in the heavenly throne room, Jesus' ministry and covenant are superior to the previous covenant and based on better promises. What is this New Covenant? The same one God promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34. The Jews knew it was coming because they knew Jeremiah's prophecy. However, many missed it because they didn't see how Jesus' life and service were the keys to its start and how it “upgraded” the Older Covenant that was worn out and couldn't continue (8:13). *Here's the truth. The Older Covenant was never meant to last. It was meant to reveal the pattern of the perfect New Covenant yet to come, but only when Jesus appeared to do everything needed to begin it.*

Finally, in chapter 9, the writer of Hebrews gets to the core – the difference between the Older and New covenants and why the New Covenant is superior to the Older. 9:1-10 describes the sacrificial system on earth with its Temple and priestly services. The priests had to perform sacrifices daily, and the High Priest could appear before God on only one day a year, the Day of Atonement. But sorry, all those sacrifices were ultimately inadequate because animal sacrifices couldn't erase sin so that a worshiper's conscience could be at peace. The best the worshiper could do was follow the ritual and regulations that God gave them for a time (9:10).

As I wrote, sins could only be covered, not erased, under the Older Covenant. But under the New Covenant, that changed. “A death has taken place for redemption from the transgressions committed under the first covenant” (9:15).

Jesus' Father showed He accepted His Son's sacrifice by raising Jesus from the dead by the Holy Spirit's power, just as He promised. Once resurrected, Jesus presented His sacrificial work to His Father in heaven – the reality behind the copy on earth. Now sin and guilt can be so erased our consciences can finally be at peace because we're no longer



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guilty and separated from God for our sins. That's the superior nature and power of Jesus' sacrifice!

The writer uses the illustration of a will to prove his point that Jesus's death activates the superior New Covenant. A will is a promise of an inheritance. God has promised us an inheritance of eternal life if we come to Him His way. But to receive that inheritance, the will-maker's death *must be proven*—the disciples bore witness to Jesus' death.

The Older Covenant was activated with an animal death (9:18-20). Then, once sin had been covered over, everything was cleansed when Moses dabbed the Tabernacles and everything in it with the sacrificial blood. There's no forgiveness or cleansing of sin if the penalty hasn't been paid (9:21-22).

Jesus and His work are superior because He stepped into His Father's presence to present His blood, not behind an earthly curtain as the earthly High Priest had to do. And because the animal sacrifices were inadequate, they had to be repeated to have an effect. Jesus' sacrifice remains in effect continually. That means when we stumble in sin, we simply have to turn to our Father, confess, and we're forgiven and cleansed. Done. Now it's up to us to change our ways and avoid stumbling during the next temptation that's sure to come.

The writer ends chapter 9 with a simple comparison. Just as a person dies only once and then is judged, so Jesus only had to die once to put an end to God's judgment against us (9:27). Now all we saved people are doing is awaiting His return to complete our salvation – new bodies to match our transformed spirit and soul (9:28).

## INSIGHT

When the writer of Hebrews says, "In the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands (that is, not of this creation), he entered the most holy place once for all time, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:11-12), and "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model[v] of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us" (9:24), do you grasp the immensity of what happened?

The writer implies that sometime after His resurrection (some say on the day of His resurrection, and others say at His ascension), Jesus left the physical realm, entered the center of heaven, His Father's throne room, and presented Himself (having died and now alive) before His Father. As the earthly High Priest presented the blood of the sin and guilt offerings before the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies (signaling a death

had occurred), Jesus stood before His Father and presented Himself as the death that had occurred that completely atones and erases sins. The fact that this actually happened blows my mind.

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## December 18 : Scriptures Hebrews 10-13

### SUMMARY

As we start our reading today, the writer continues to prove to his audience of Jewish believers how insufficient the Older Covenant was compared to the New Covenant. For a time, animal sacrifices for sin were acceptable but not good enough to solve the sin problem. Sinners sin, and so sacrifices had to be repeated (10:1). If they were sufficient to solve the sin issue, sacrifices for sin and guilt could have stopped (10:2). But not only did sin remind the person that they were sinners, the need for sacrifices did the same thing. Can you feel the helplessness and futility of the Older Covenant covering but not getting rid of sins (10:3-4)?

Ah, but there *is* a single sacrifice that single-handedly wipes out the sin issue to where no other sacrifice needs to be made. Jesus became flesh so He could die as the Supreme Sacrifice, predicted in Psalm 40:6-8, which the writer quotes (10:5-7).

Two things thrill me here. 1) God had this all planned out from the beginning and slowly revealed the plan in pieces throughout His word, recorded in the Hebrew scriptures written over 3,400 years ago. 2) We must know, understand, and accept the “theological” fact that Jesus had to be both God and human. *As God*, Jesus was qualified as the sinless sacrifice to stand in our place. *As a human being*, Jesus was qualified to take the punishment for sin – Jesus physically died and experienced (somehow) what it means to be separated from God because of sin. If Jesus weren’t both God and Man, there would be no effective sacrifice for sin, and we’re all lost forever.

But Jesus willingly gave Himself, and all who come to Him are saved, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time” (10:10) and “by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified” (10:14). Jesus made it possible for us to be saved and to begin our perfecting process. This process happens because the Holy Spirit is in us, helping us to line up with God’s word (10:16). Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, there’s no need for any more sacrifices for sin and guilt (10:17).

Now that Jesus has done His work and opened the way into God’s presence, what does that mean for us? Simple. We have our work to do as saved and changed people.

“Let us draw near” means we have *full access* to our Father. There’s no need to be shy! We have a Father with open arms, waiting to receive His children to love on them any time, all the time. No sin, guilt, or threat of punishment keeps us away ever again. We can draw near to God with full assurance (10:22). “Let us hold on” because we have a

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Father who will help us stay faithful to Him (10:23). And "Let us consider" or be concerned about how we can encourage one another to be loving and do good works. That kind of encouragement doesn't happen when we're Lone Ranger Christians but works best when we get together with other believers. That's why the writer warns them not to skip getting together with other believers (10:24-25). This last part will be especially needed toward the end when the whole world goes wild weasel just before Jesus returns.

In 10:26-32, we reach the fourth of the five exhortations, "Don't presume you can sin without consequences." The writer reminds his readers, "If you think the consequences were bad under the Older Covenant, imagine how bad they are when you sin *after* being saved. Whoa!" Doing so is like "trampling on Jesus and regarding His sacrifice as *common, unclean*" (10:29). No good will come of that, for "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). Seriously. Do you *really* want to take on God?

So what should we do? Rather than turn away from God, we should embrace the struggle. The recipients of the book of Hebrews knew full well what came with following Jesus – persecution (Matthew 5:10-12; John 15:20). They got hit with persecution, stood with others going through it, and even lost possessions. No matter. The Father will reward those who hang in there with Him. He's promised it. Remember, it will only be those who have faith in God who are saved (10:32-39). So carry on, faithful disciple.

And speaking of God-loving, faithful people, the writer begins his walk through the Lord's Faith Hall of Fame in chapter 11 to encourage his readers. I love verse 11:1, "Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen." I sometimes have an issue with the word "faith" because it's often confused with belief, i.e., mental agreement. The dictionary has three definitions of faith; loyalty, trust, and belief. In the Hebraic sense, faith is not something one has (a noun) but something one *does* (a verb). Faith as a verb was once used like that, but it's fallen into disuse. We could say we "faith God" as in "I have faith in God," but I like to substitute "I trust" God. It's the same idea, but it speaks to me more.

I have faith (I believe) that a tightrope walker can cross Niagra Falls carrying a person on his shoulders, but it takes a *tremendous* amount of trust to be the one who hops on his shoulders for the ride. Similarly, I have faith that God can take people through any situation, no matter how severe, but it takes trust to walk through the situation with Him in real-time. I've learned that I have that kind of trust when approaching or entering a challenging situation, and I have peace. I call that *having faith unto peace*. Just recently, my bank account ran low. I had the choice of giving my tithe to God or using those funds to

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pay two bills. I chose to pay my tithe. Why? Because I trust that God can easily provide. I had peace about it.

Guess what? The next day my refrigerator died, and the repair guy said fixing it would cost \$1,500. Yup. We were looking at a new refrigerator, *and I didn't even have the money for two bills totaling \$400*. I shrugged and said the same thing as I did with the bills – “God can provide.” Bam! The next day a friend gave me a check to buy a new refrigerator, and the new fridge came within *one penny* of what my friend had given me. That's a trust affirmation and trust-builder!

I share all this because of Hebrews 11:1. The word for reality (CSB) is *hupostasis* – *hupo* “under” and *stasis* “to stand” – something that stands under another thing to support it. Other Bible versions translate it as “assurance of what is hoped for.” The word for proof (CSB) is alternatively translated as *conviction*, as in “a strong persuasion or belief.” That's the Greek word *elegchos* – a proof or test. If I were to translate the verse, it would be, “Now trust is the solid foundation for what we hope to receive from God, knowing as a real fact what we have not experienced or received yet, but we know is coming.”

In other words, my friend said he would give me the money to buy a new refrigerator. I trust him because he's a man of his word. Therefore, my trust supports me in peaceful anticipation of what I know is coming, so much so that I'm taking action now (shopping for a new fridge on the day I write this). Even though the physical check isn't in my hands, I'm acting like it is.

That's how it is with our faith in God, not just for eternal life but for this life and the next and on into eternity. He promised, and we act accordingly and have peace as we live for Him.

The writer of Hebrews gives his readers a long string of “Heroes of Faith in God” to encourage them to remain steadfast in trusting their Heavenly Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The writer's list starts with us. We trust that God made the seen realm from nothing because God said so (11:3). What follows are examples of people who trusted God and received a reward (11:6) even though some died before they received what God promised (11:13). However, their trust in God allowed them to die while continuing to trust Him, convinced that they would one day receive what had been promised – they had the conviction of what is not seen (not received yet). Their trust was the foundation of their hope in what God promised them.

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In short, despite what they all went through – whether good or incredibly bad (being sawed in two, 11:37, and other persecutions and tribulations) – they all received what God had promised them, a relationship and life with Him forever. But they didn't receive it right away until God had completed the salvation process, and they (and us, eventually) could enjoy it together (11:39-40). The faithful, righteous people of old now live in God's presence, waiting for the faithful, righteous people of now to join them.

How, then, shall we live here on earth? That brings us to chapter 12 and the first part of the fifth and last exhortation. The writer encourages us to drop anything tripping us up, slowing us down, or breakin' our stride, and "run through life with endurance" with our eyes fixed laser-like on Jesus standing at the finish line (12:1-2). Just as Jesus pressed through difficulties for the sake of the joy awaiting Him, so should we.

But what if we suffer? Oh, we will. That's a given. But we're not to wallow in it or let it stop us. The writer tells us God allows suffering as a form of discipline to strengthen us and mature our trust in Him, just like earthly fathers discipline their kids (12:7-10). But let's be honest. No sane person likes to suffer, but when we've gone through it, we've gained all sorts of good things (12:11), so at least we've got that going for us, and the writer gives us a "buck up, little cowboy/cowgirl" poke (12:12-13).

"What else shall we do, O Writer of Hebrews?" He tells us to live in peace and holiness because we need to be and act like the Lord to enter His presence. Where does that being like the Lord come from? From the Father via Jesus, by His grace.

We come to the second part of the fifth exhortation, 12:14-29. The writer urges us to hold tight to the Father's discipline because it shows His grace upon us. If He didn't care about us, He'd let us run wild and die in our sins. But He does care, as shown by His work in our lives.

The writer cautions his readers not to refuse or fall short (Greek, "to slight or snub") of the Father's grace and allow a bitter root to take hold among the believers. What does "bitter root" mean? When we read the New Covenant scriptures and encounter a puzzling phrase, I recommend a word search through the entire Bible. I searched "bitter root," and the only verse beside here in Hebrews was Deuteronomy 29:18, and it parallels the writer's words, "Be sure there is no man, woman, clan, or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations. *Be sure there is no root among you bearing poisonous and bitter fruit*" (Deuteronomy 29:18).

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Knowing that New Covenant writers often draw on the Hebrew scriptures, this tells us the writer is cautioning his readers not to turn from God and return to idolatry. This temptation would be a problem for a Jew in a pagan area or a Gentile who became a Jesus-follower after living as a pagan. In other words, don't snub God's grace or sell out to satisfy one's desires as Esau did. If you do, you might find heaven's door shut and locked, with you unable to repent (12:15-17). Remember, you're not messing with the "old" way of salvation (Mt. Sinai). You're dealing with the Father's salvation, worked out for you at another mountain, Mount Zion, in Jerusalem. You're now part of the great community of spiritual beings, fellow believers, and Jesus Himself, so you better listen and heed what the Father is saying through His Son. Abel's blood called out for revenge, but Jesus' blood cries out for mercy. Which one do you want? If Mount Sinai shook when God showed up, what will it be like when Jesus returns? Are you ready for that? When Jesus shakes the earth, will you stand firm or be shaken out of His kingdom? It all depends on whether you embrace God's grace or not. *Do it today!* As someone quipped, "Turn or burn. Get right or get left. Fall in or fall out."

We come to the final chapter of Hebrews. As Paul does in his letters (and Paul might have written Hebrews), the writer delivers practical guidance about how to live a godly life as a believer in a congregation. Be loving, show hospitality, visit prisoners (because their families were responsible for caring for their needs) and empathize with them, honor your marriage and keep it godly, don't focus on material things, honor your leaders, watch out for strange and unbiblical teachings, specifically those promoting legalism (looking to be saved by following the Torah/Law) and Judaizing (adopting Jewish practices to "guarantee" one's salvation) (13:1-9).

The writer now makes a harsh comparison. First, remember that he's a Jew writing to fellow Jews saved under the New Covenant. Second, he just referenced things to avoid, legalism and Judaizing, particularly as it relates to the food laws, so this is an intra-family comment. Under the Older Covenant, the High Priest doesn't partake in (eat) the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement because it was made for the people's sins. It had to be burned outside the camp.

Conversely, under the New Covenant, believers "partake," i.e., find their sustenance for life from their sacrifice for sin – Jesus. He was crucified outside Jerusalem's city walls. He was humiliated and disgraced (13:12). So, the writer tells us, let us not be afraid to join in Jesus' disgrace and humiliation that will come to us by following our Lord (13:13). Because we're looking forward to a future restoration because of Jesus, let's praise Him like crazy.

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Finally, he tells his readers to do good and obey their leaders and not to make their leaders' oversight job more challenging than it is. Oh, and don't forget to pray for the writer's ministry team and that it'll be possible to visit them soon. The writer ends with a beautiful benediction, reminding them who watches over them – the great Shepherd of the sheep (echoes of John 10:1-21), gives them news of Timothy's release and that they might show up together, and asks them to give the writer's greeting to the leaders and the congregations on his behalf.

### INSIGHT

"These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised" (11:13). The writer is referring to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob, who died before they could receive the land inheritance promised to them by God under His covenant with them. They never received their physical home, and because they died before Jesus' atoning death just over 2,000 years later, they weren't allowed into the Ultimate Promised Land – God's presence. So they died in faith, not receiving the substance of things hoped for and the essence of things not seen (promised). But they were saved and destined to come into the Father's presence once Jesus' death and resurrection were complete.

Salvation, divine approval, and the gift of eternal life with God have always and ever been by trusting God. All those faithful followers of Yehovah who died before Jesus' died on the cross were kept safe in the part of Sheol reserved for the righteous, called Paradise. They had to wait until Jesus completed His atoning work that allowed the erasure of sin in a person, not just covering it over. Once that was done, the faithful people who had died under the Older Covenant could finally be freed from their *required* distancing from God. When Jesus died, he descended to Sheol. He announced His victory over God's enemies and freedom for the righteous (1 Peter 4:6). He rose from the dead. At His ascension (Ephesians 4:9-10), Jesus led the righteous dead into His Father's presence (Ephesians 4:8), presenting Himself and them to the Father.

It seems so unfair that God kept them waiting for so long. *But they were waiting for you and me!* "All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us *so that they would not be made perfect without us*" (11:39-40). When Jesus opened the way back into His Father's presence, the departed Older Covenant and New Covenant saints joined the joyous procession to the Ultimate Promised Land – God's presence forever.

The exciting part is that many more people are joining in the procession as even now, faithful believers take their last breath. Will you be a part of the Parade of the Faithful?



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## December 19 : Scriptures James 1-5

### SUMMARY

We now come to the book of James. Who was James? He was Jesus' half-brother, nicknamed "James the Just." He was a primary leader in the Jewish messianic movement called the Way, later renamed Christianity when it took hold among the Gentiles. According to historical sources, James served as the leader of the mother congregation in Jerusalem starting in 44 A.D. and continued for 18 years. James made important decisions for the relatively new Messianic Movement in Judaism, including the question, "Do the Gentiles have to get circumcised and follow the Torah/Law to be saved?" (Acts 15). James' decision was passed from the Jerusalem messianic community to all the other messianic congregations. The Early Church Fathers record James as dying a martyr's death at the Sanhedrin's hands in A.D. 62.

James' name in Hebrew is *Ya'akov*, Jacob. James is the anglicized version. For you language nerds, here's how James' name changed over time: "In the Greek language, the Hebrew name Yaaqob becomes Iakób in a straight translation... In Late Latin, however, a slight change in spelling and pronunciation occurred, and the name started to be written as Iacomus (or Jacomus). Early French adapted the Latin name and truncated it to Gemmes (or Jammes), and from there English took it as James" ([gotquestions.org/James-vs-Jacob.html](http://gotquestions.org/James-vs-Jacob.html)). There! That info might someday help you win a million dollars on *Jeopardy!*

James' book is very practical and goes through a series of comments about living our faith practically. Godly works as proof of our faith is a central theme. For this reason, one of the Reformers, Martin Luther, whose Reformation theology emphasized "justification by faith alone" (Ephesians 2:8-9), recoiled at James' focus on good works because the Catholic Church at the time was highly focused on works as part of salvation. Dr. Marty's over-sensitivity to the issue led him to call James' letter "The Epistle of Straw" because "it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it" ([zondervanacademic.com/blog/martin-luther-james-bible](http://zondervanacademic.com/blog/martin-luther-james-bible)). I object, Herr Doktor! James' book is about what the Gospel looks like when it's lived out, and in this case, in a very Jewish way.

What? Jewish? Yes. Thanks to the late Dr. David Friedman's book, *James the Just*, we discover that James wasn't just writing a letter. He was writing what appears to be a *yalqut*, "A collection of highlighted teachings by a rabbi, often collected by his students" (Friedman). In modern Hebrew, a *yalqut* refers to a "backpack" in which a student carries their books and school supplies. A written *yalqut* is a collection of interpretations and

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applications of God's Torah that a disciple has with them. As you read James' book, you'll see this definition fits well. It has 1) practical encouragements on how to live, 2) concrete guidelines on how to live the Torah/Law, and 3) emphasizes the need for works as proof that one has a strong faith in Israel's God and Messiah Jesus.

James' purpose is to instruct the messianic disciples spread abroad ("to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion," 1:1) on how best to keep the biblical commands and to make them relevant to a disciple's world. Throughout James' letter, we see his concern is for purity, justice, and holiness, reflecting God in practical living. It all boils down to the Royal Law of Leviticus (James 2:8; Leviticus 19:18). His letter to Jesus' disciples reads like a Synagogue Sabbath School lesson on Leviticus 19:1-20:27. Here are parallels for further reference:

- Misusing God's name (*Leviticus 19:12*, James 4:13-15; 5:12).
- Paying what is due (*Leviticus 19:13*, James 5:4).
- Impartiality (*Leviticus 19:15*, James 2:1).
- Evil speech (*Leviticus 19:16*, James 4:11).
- Restoring the sinner (*Leviticus 19:17*, James 5:20).
- The Royal Law (*Leviticus 19:18*, James 2:8).
- Mind the whole Torah (*Leviticus 19:19, 37, 20:8*, James 2:10-12)

To sum it up, the book of James is a How-To letter to help us all walk out the salvation we've been given by trusting Jesus as our Savior.

Chapter 1 opens positively – trials and temptations. Yes, this was sarcasm, and I'm being facetious. It's James encouraging us to look at trials and temptations positively. Such times are normal and should be accepted because they help us mature spiritually. As some have quipped, "There's no testimony without a test." So when we smack into trials, go with them and let them accomplish their work. Sometimes trials just happen, and sometimes they're sent by God. Just like gold's purity is proven and improved by fire, so is the "proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—(that it) may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7).

What's one of the first ways to handle a trial? With wisdom, and that's what James encourages us to ask the Lord about (1:5). Part of maturing is acquiring wisdom, which is knowledge forged in the fires of experience. Spiritual wisdom comes from spiritual knowledge put to the test. Therefore, trials develop wisdom. James' caveat is that when we ask for wisdom, we should come to God with complete trust, expecting Him to answer our request "generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5). What we can glean from this

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is that God has promised to give us wisdom when we ask, so don't doubt ("Gee, can You/will You really do that, Jesus?) or not ask because you assume God thinks you're an idiot for asking.

Speaking of trials, one of the most challenging trials in American life is coming up short in the ol' bank account. We think, "Oh, if I were only rich, I wouldn't have a care in the world!" You know, like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* dreaming, "If I were a rich man!" But here, James turns things upside down. Two types of people are tested with money trials – the poor and the rich. Those with limited resources should be happy because their economically poor state breeds humility, which the Lord rewards (i.e., exaltation).

On the other hand, the rich shouldn't boast about their economic state because they will die just like the poor person, and both stand equal in God's sight, so what good does money do you in light of eternity? Each side needs to take their eyes off cash and focus on the Lord, which will alleviate some of the stress of the trial. Whether rich or poor, those who stay faithful under financial difficulties "will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (1:12).

Those who love the Lord should never mistake a trial from God as a temptation. A trial is a difficult situation intended to mature you. Temptation is a difficult situation that entices us to sin. God uses trials and never tempts us. And contrary to popular belief, Satan and his minions are not our primary source of temptation, although they can whisper in our ears. James rightly points out that our primary source of temptation *is us*, so stop blaming everything else. If we don't take responsibility for our temptation, then it's easy to blame sin on anything other than where it rightly belongs – on us (1:14-15). God only gives good gifts, and temptation ain't one of them. Everything He gives us is good, and we can depend on His care. After all, He went to all the trouble to remake us, right (1:18)?

So, how should we live under trials, temptations, and all other times? We must control ourselves, especially when our passions (desires) are inflamed. How do we do that? By not only learning God's word but doing it! As we'll see, head knowledge is good, but it means diddly-squat for helping us mature spiritually if we don't put it all into practice. Our Father's purpose is for us to become the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), that is, to *live* like Him in word and deed. Hebraically speaking, we should be more concerned that someone lives God's word more than they say they're Christians. There's the proof. Actions speak louder than words. Furthermore, putting God's word into practice helps ingrain it into our minds so we don't forget it (1:23-24). Those who focus on becoming like Jesus by putting God's words into practice "will be blessed in what he does" (1:25).

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Part of that outworking of our faith is watching what we say and standing up for the vulnerable (1:26-27).

In chapter 2, we read James' (Rabbi Jacob's) Torah lessons about the sin of showing partiality, how the Lord's Royal Law counters that, and why we should learn and follow God's entire Torah for one infraction makes you a law-breaker of His entire Law (2:10).

As for impartiality (2:1-7), hear what Leviticus 19:15 says, "Do not act unjustly when deciding a case. Do not be partial to the poor or give preference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly." See? James is not giving a new command but a lesson on a Torah command. So, for Christians to say God has done away with His Torah/Law and all we need to do is "love one another," we learn *how* to love one another by learning and living our Heavenly Father's commands from the whole Bible under the Holy Spirit's power and guidance.

In the Leviticus quote above, the Lord talks about judges deciding cases. But don't we make judgments about people daily? We should make decisions based on their character and actions, not their economic standing, gender, or anything else that doesn't matter. God discerns the heart, and so should we, starting with our own. However, this doesn't mean we give people a pass because we fall short of God's standards. Absolutely not! Let's judge, but with fairness according to Jesus' standards (see *Cruisin' Through The Bible* on Matthew 7).

Our overriding guideline is the Royal Law, "Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but *love your neighbor as yourself*; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18, italics author). Loving others as I love myself is more than a feeling. In one biblical sense, to love in a comparison mode (others vs. myself, or "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated," Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:13) means to favor/to prefer one person over another. Therefore, if we love someone else more than ourselves, then as much as we favor and prefer ourselves, we should favor and prefer others *more*, putting their best interests above ours. If I would never harm myself, how much more should I not harm others? (Now, there's an excellent rabbi-style argument!) Therefore, the Royal Law demands that I follow the Torah as much as the Holy Spirit interprets and applies it to me.

"But Dr. Jay, James says if I break one part, I'm guilty of breaking it all! Whatever shall I do?" True. That's why Jesus died for us to cover our intentional and unintentional sins to keep our relationship with our Father open and set us on the path once again. But because we've been given the "law of freedom," the Gospel, it's not an excuse to be lawless/Torahless. Hear how strictly God regarded Israel's obedience. "Keep all my

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statutes and all my ordinances and do them; I am the Lord" and "Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sets you apart" (Leviticus 19:37, 20:8). Our obedience sets us apart as the Lord's people. The world's disobedience proves the unsaved person is not God's person.

If a Christian claims to be saved and no life change indicates an increasingly holy life, we can gently and lovingly call them on it. Do they really have a saving faith (2:14)? If they're not saved, our gracious and loving question may cause them to stop pretending and help them meet Jesus. If they are saved, we'll have helped a fellow believer in their walk with God. Win-win! What counts for James (and Jesus) is faith *proven* by godly works (2:15-26). The demons believe, but they certainly won't be living for their enemy, Jesus. Why would a professing, head-knowledge-only believer want to be lumped in with them? As James points out, we want to be like Rahab and Abraham, who proved their trust in God by what they did (2:21-26).

In chapter 3, we see a rabbi admonishing his disciples. It appears some of the disciples Rabbi James wrote to were having squabbles amongst themselves, possibly about who was more knowledgeable or wiser. James cautions his readers about not being too eager to become Bible teachers because God will judge teachers more strictly than others. Teachers have much more influence over a larger group than most individuals. If a person teaches an error, it can be easily corrected. If a teacher teaches error, it can be spread far and wide. That's one reason I wince when I see so-called Bible teachers rush to put their "knowledge and wisdom" out on the internet, and I hear them teach wrong, unbiblical, and sometimes crazy things. Some teachers teach to help their students. Some teachers teach because they enjoy having influence or use it as a platform for ego or, frankly, making money.

Because we teachers will be judged more strictly, we must be cautious about controlling our tongues, which again opens up the speech issue for James. Our tongues are the most harmful and deadly part of our bodies. I can hit someone, and they'll heal in a few days. But I can shred someone verbally and destroy their whole life, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21). I've been on the receiving end of verbal abuse, and I'm sure you have as well dear reader, so you know what I mean. Our tongues direct our lives (3:3-5) and can cause widespread damage (3:5). It's set on fire by hell, "For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (Matthew 12:34). Our speech shows if we're right with God and reveals our inner being. What do your words from yesterday reveal about you?

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Controlling our tongues is challenging (3:7-8), but that's no excuse. If we're truly saved, we should be constantly aware of what we say. If we're tight with Jesus, how can unclean things come from our mouths? Like James asks, how can we worship Jesus and curse His brothers and sisters? Wouldn't we think something was wrong if our kitchen faucets simultaneously poured our cold, clear, pure water and raw, slimy sewage (3:10-12)? You'd work to find out what's wrong and fix it, right? Well, what's coming out of our mouths? The solution to the speech problem with the untamed tongue is seeking genuine wisdom from God, "who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (1:5). Maturity is linked to controlling one's tongue (3:2). Yes, learning how to control our speech amid trials is one way of maturing.

Regarding wisdom, James writes that, like genuine faith, genuine godly wisdom proves itself proved through good works (good conduct). The opposite of "good conduct done in gentleness" that demonstrates godly wisdom is "bitter envy and selfish ambition," which reveals wisdom with an earthly source. How can a person claim to have godly knowledge yet act poorly (3:14-16)? Godly wisdom from above (God) reveals itself through godly actions that produce peace. "Teachers who possess wisdom from above produce virtues that fulfill the 'royal law' [2:8] and promote unity within the congregation" (HCSB commentary).

The topic of promoting peace brings us to chapter 4. Again, chapter headings can sometimes break up the writer's flow of thoughts. If we don't control our tongues and let loose speech based on earthly wisdom, we'll often find ourselves in conflict with others, which is what James talks about next.

The root of strife among people is letting our passions/desires/lusts rule us rather than the Holy Spirit. For the born-again person, every day seems to be a literal royal battle between our life's former king (us) and our new king (Jesus) as our passions fight within us to see which king we'll choose to follow today.

Before we were saved, we just followed one king – us – driven by our desires. We would think that after being born-again and transformed by the Holy Spirit, we would be free to follow Jesus effortlessly. Nope. It's that word *effortlessly*. We're now free to follow Jesus, but the Lord wants us to do it willingly, and that's the Lord's point. He wants children who follow Him willingly, not like robots. And so, becoming spiritually mature involves the trials of obediently following God's wisdom and will, producing works in speech and deeds that prove our faith.

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James says we fight with ourselves and others to get what we want, to satisfy our urges and desires (4:1-2). James' solution is simple. Ask God (the source) and ask properly (the right motivations). People don't ask God or ask improperly because of selfishness, which shows we're this-world-oriented, not Jesus-oriented (4:3-4). But the Holy Spirit won't let us stay that way. He pulls us back toward Jesus, and that creates the struggle within. If we're proud and insist on going our way, the Lord will resist within us. If we're humble and submit to the Lord's way, He will help us, even driving external tempters away ("Resist the devil and he will flee from you," 4:6-7). If we repent (change our minds and how we're going), rather than proudly standing our ground, God will exalt us because we're humbling ourselves before Him (4:8-10).

Doing so will cause us to stop criticizing and judging others in God's family (4:11-12). This teaching connects with Leviticus 19:16, "Do not go about spreading slander among your people; do not jeopardize (stand against) your neighbor's life; I am the Lord." Again, aligning our lives with Jesus will affect our speech (criticizing and judging).

Speaking of pride, James addresses a hypothetical situation that shows pride. It's making plans that leave God out of the planning process (4:13-16). It's related to the Torah command about misusing God's name, "Do not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:12). In other words, if God is really part of our lives (taking His name upon us), then not including Him in our planning is, in essence, denying Him, showing that He's not a part of our lives. Therefore, we have taken God's name vainly and are abusing His name by claiming it in word and denying it in action. Such boasting that the Lord is in control (but not really) is arrogant and evil.

In the businessperson context, in chapter 5, James addresses rich people who are often satisfied with life because their finances are their security rather than God. According to James, the wealthy he's addressing live in luxury and indulge themselves while shorting those who work for them (5:4-5). James' indictment is sharp, "You have condemned, you have murdered the righteous, who does not resist you" (5:6). Such a rebuke is a verbal slap intended to get the offenders to repent and care for those who work for them as Leviticus 19:13 commands, "Do not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages due a hired worker must not remain with you until morning." Do you see how James' letter is a practical application sermon/teaching on verses from Leviticus 19?

As James wraps up his letter, he hits on the big topic – Jesus' return. I'm again struck by how Paul, James, and the Early Christian community anticipated Jesus' return in their lifetimes. Two thousand years later, many Evangelicals are the same way, *except* we have the sure signs that Jesus told us would happen leading up to His arrival – Israel's rebirth

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(Matthew 24:29-35) and the Jews regaining Jerusalem (Luke 21:24). These two primary signs had not existed since A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. The Jews were exiled into the Dispersion by the Romans. If James' encouragement applied to his readers, *how much more* do his words apply to us today? We'll need strong hearts because Jesus warned us of amp-up persecution as His return approaches. Talk about rejoicing when we encounter trials that *will* test our trust in God. James writes that we're to take our patient endurance cues from the prophets and Job, who remained faithful even when their world crashed.

In the meantime, we're to speak truthfully, not hedging our word (5:12). As Leviticus 19:12 says, "Do not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God; I am the Lord." Once again, we see that James's letter is a *yalqut*, a teaching for messianic disciples based on the section from Leviticus. Depending on our circumstances, we should be constant in prayer and praise. If anyone is sick, the first call is for the elders to come, anoint the sick with oil, and ask God for healing. If the sickness' source is sin, that's a perfect time to get that out of the way via confession, knowing that the Lord *will* forgive the sinner and sin won't stand in the way of healing (5:14-16). "Remember, disciples," James writes, "God answers the prayers of righteous people mightily" (5:17-18), and they're righteous through Jesus, so pray!

Oh, and one last thing from Leviticus 19:17, "Do not harbor hatred against your brother. Rebuke your neighbor directly, and you will not incur guilt because of him." Part of our job as believers is to find those who have strayed from Jesus and lead them back. The implication is *you may not want to pursue your brother (or sister) because their sin was against you*. Go after them anyway so they won't be lost, and all sins will be covered.

## INSIGHT

I once watched a fascinating TV show about ocean science. The host explained how waves affect a ball in the water. You would think the waves would constantly push it forward as wave after wave struck the ball. Not so. When the wave hits, the ball first goes forward, but as the waves pass, the ball is lifted and slides back down the backside of the wave. If looked at from the side, the ball makes an up-down and forward-backward motion. Yes, it goes in circles while making slow, forward progress.

That illustrates James's writing in 1:6-8, "But let him ask in faith without doubting. *For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind*. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded and unstable in all his ways." The doubter isn't sure what is more robust – God or their situation – so they rock forward



in faith and backward in doubt, going in circles with little forward motion, not receiving what they ask for because God responds to trust, not doubt.

However, having grown up on a lake and now living near a beach, I know from experience how to move the ball despite the rocking of the waves. *Wind!* If the wind blows strong enough against the incoming waves, the wind will push the ball away from shore. That's why we need to ask the Lord for wisdom and help from His Holy Spirit (Hebrew, *ruach*), the wind of God. With His help, we can overcome our circumstances every time and receive the support we need from our Heavenly Father, generously and ungrudgingly. Trust Him!

## December 20 : Scriptures 1 Peter 1-5

### SUMMARY

Peter wrote the following two letters. Peter was Jesus' lead disciple and to whom He gave "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," a Jewish idiom about having rabbinic authority to make decisions binding on a community of disciples in a synagogue.

The closest date of the letter is c. 62-64, during the rise of persecution in the Roman Empire. The first inklings of persecution began when Emperor Claudius of Rome "expelled" Jews from Rome, apparently due to conflicts between messianic and non-messianic Jews. "Disputes between Jews and members of the Christian sect in Rome had caused disturbances and Claudius apparently either banished certain Jews or prohibited them from assembling, which led to their voluntary departure, sometime between 41 and 50 C.E. It is generally accepted that the emperor's aim was the preservation of peace and not an act of hostility toward the Jews" ([jewishvirtuallibrary.org/claudius](http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/claudius)). What followed two decades later was widespread persecution of the messianic Jews by Nero (A.D. 64-68), Domitian (A.D. 90-96), Trajan (A.D. 98-117), and others. Peter's letter reflects the suffering experienced by Jesus' followers, likely because they refused pagan practices and emperor worship.

Peter wrote his letter to these persecuted believers dispersed throughout the Roman empire as James did. The recipients are in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia," Roman provinces in northern Asia Minor (Turkey today), and one region in the south, Galatia. Peter sends greetings from the believers in "Babylon," a veiled reference to Rome.

Peter's themes in his first letter are suffering, persecution, standing firm while looking beyond the trials of this life, and how to conduct oneself as Jesus' representative. For Peter, suffering is expected because the world naturally hates God's people (Jesus said that to His disciples, John 15:18-19), and we're only passing through this temporary place in life. Since our final destination is to be with God, holiness, purity, goodness, and love are essential for us to develop in preparation for eternity.

Peter opens his letter with a customary greeting. Yeah, I'm not going to get into the predestination debate. If you want to know more about that, go to [gotquestions.org/Calvinism-vs-Arminianism.html](http://gotquestions.org/Calvinism-vs-Arminianism.html). What I will say is if the Lord, in His infinite wisdom and grace, is tugging on you to give your allegiance to Him by committing your life and service to Jesus, *answer the call!* The Father will forgive and

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cleansing you (Jesus' death on your behalf) and give you His Holy Spirit to help you learn how to live right and obey His word. 'Nuff said.

I like how Peter opens his letter with a blessing to God (1:3). I'm reminded to do that every morning, throughout the day, and as I close out my day. Why does Peter bless the Father? Because we're not only born again to live for Him in this life, but we have even better things yet to come, "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1:4).

The word "guarded/protected" in verse 5 refers to a military guard. In that sense, after we're saved, our Heavenly Father places us under guard to ensure we "ain't goin' nowhere" but to our inheritance. During our time in His custody, we're living in a tough place where we experience grief in various trials that serves as a test for our faith to see how genuine our faith is. Our faith is more valuable than gold because no one can buy their way into heaven. God opens the door, and we trustfully enter.

The incredible thing is we're doing this without ever seeing Jesus (1:8), although we're filled with joy when we are saved and grow spiritually. Peter tells us we're in a particular class of God's people throughout history. The prophets and angels longed to see what the Father was working on regarding the new way His kingdom would appear on earth through His people. Prophets knew in advance about "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (Isaiah 53, Psalm 22), but they never saw them. Even angels wanted to know about what the Father had planned. But we're the ones who experienced it all! Peter, especially since he walked and talked with Jesus, watched Jesus suffer, and saw Jesus in His resurrected body (Acts 4:19-20; John 20:19-20).

Peter continues with a "therefore" in 1:13, which means "because the Father has done all this for you," and implies the question, "How then should we respond to our Father's great gift?" Simple. Be ready for action (gird your loins, i.e., put on your big kid pants), be sober (literally and figuratively), and focus on what you're hoping for – seeing Jesus (1:13). We're not to live like the world but as God would have us live, as a reflection of Himself (1:14-16).

By the way, did you know we're aliens? No, not space aliens, although some would accuse Christians of being that weird (and frankly, some are. Just sayin'). Peter emphasizes that we're *temporary residents* as God's people on Earth, and while we're alive, we're to act reverentially toward God. You know. Don't shame Him or smudge His name by being sinful or obnoxious. Instead, we must bear His name well, reflecting Him as accurately as possible. We're to do that in response to the *enormous* work of salvation He's

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accomplished for our sake (1:18-21). After we're saved, we're to take the love our Father has shown us and love one another (1:22). This proves we're genuinely born again and changed through God's imperishable word.

Peter writes to Jesus' followers that in light of their trials by persecution, they should keep the light shining brightly (Jesus revealed through their lives) by living holy lives. As the Triune God came to us in human form (Jesus) to show who He is in the best way we could understand and relate to Him, we're to do the same with the Holy Spirit living in and through us. That's the best testimony to God we can have that our persecutors will ever see.

In chapter 2, Peter continues with another "therefore," which tags back to "Since you have purified yourselves by your obedience to the truth" and "because you have been born again" (1:22-23). Because of these two things, get rid of evil in your lives, and like newborn babies (a reference to the born-again salvation experience), drink in God's word so you can grow big and strong as godly men and women. Some of you readers may remember the old ad for the dairy industry, "Milk, it does a body good." That's especially true for the body of Christ. *God's word is essential to spiritual maturity*, and as milk is delicious, so is our experience with God as we drink in His Word (2:3).

Peter continues. By turning the living body metaphor into another one about being a building constructed of "living stones." Even though the world rejects what it deems as worthless stones (the believers), God takes those stones and builds a magnificent living Temple that offers sacrifices to Him that the world can never present (2:5).

A cornerstone is crucial to a building as all other stones are set in relation to it, from the first and nearest to the farthest and last. Cornerstones are often placed in a public ceremony (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), and it provides support for the whole building. Cornerstones were often laid to orient the building to the heavens or a planner's blueprint for a city's layout. Cornerstones were sometimes solid but often hollow to contain a metal box for items to be stored "with a view to their historical use" (Britannic.com). Cornerstones were often engraved with the builder or building owner's name (billwarch.com/blog/the-little-known-purpose-of-the-cornerstone).

Of all the stones Peter references (us, in general), he refers specifically to Jesus as God's cornerstone. Jesus is the first stone placed in relation to God's new temple, the New Covenant Temple, built from living people, not inanimate stones. We living stones really do cry out God's praise (Luke 19:37-40) and are the place of God's most holy sacrifices and the incense of prayer (2:5; Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4). Jesus orients us toward heaven and

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designs the layout for the future City of God on Earth, His people. When God selects us and sets us into place to build His Living Temple, every stone from the first and nearest to the farthest and last are connected to Jesus and find our proper orientation relative to Him. Jesus is the repository of God's Word, the Torah, and the rest of inspired scripture, for His and all future generations, accessible to all. On Jesus, our Cornerstone is written His Father's name as the Temple's owner and Jesus' name as the Master Architect and Builder. Jesus, the Cornerstone of our faith, was set in place on the earth by a public celebration at His crucifixion and remains the sole source of support and stability for His Temple of Living Stones. God's Living Temple continues to rise until the day its construction is finished. When Jesus said, "It is finished," I believe He referred to Himself settling into place and to the day His Father will declare over His Temple of Living Stones, "It is finished!"

But not all have embraced the Father's Cornerstone, which contains God's word about salvation. Far too many have tripped over and cursed it rather than seeing how important it is to them (2:8), to their eternal loss.

Peter completes his picture by switching metaphors again. Now we're the priesthood that serves God and subjects of the King who inhabits His throneroom within the new Temple. Our God and King has made us His royal priesthood, holy subjects, to love and serve Him willingly and joyfully. As His people, we're to shine with the light of spiritual revelation in a very dark world (2:9-10).

How do we do that? Again, Peter returns to how we behave, even if those around us misbehave by persecuting us. We must:

- 1) Refuse to gratify sinful desires (2:11).
- 2) Conduct ourselves honorably among the Gentiles. We're to live such good, godly lives that even though persecutors go after us now, they'll be forced to glorify God when they see the truth about us when Jesus returns (2:12). All exceptions aside, we are to honor the government because *normally*, even ungodly governments "punish those who do what is evil and... praise those who do what is good." It's only when governments go off the rails into evil or try to force us to betray God that we're to resist. For the most part, that's usually not the case, so "honor everyone. Love the brothers and sisters. Fear God. Honor the (President)" (2:17). Yeah, I know it's tough at times. Still, I don't see "tough" or "deserving of reviling" as an excuse to be rude or vicious against government leaders. And yes, I'm working on this myself.
- 3) Just like dealing with the government, employees are to honor, submit to, and work with employers whether they are lovely and gracious or total jerks (2:18). If we have

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to suffer for being a godly testimony to an employer, so be it. No good deed goes without God knowing about it, and He will reward us eventually. But why should we suffer evil for good? Because Jesus did. If suffering evil for good was the Father's will for Jesus to accomplish His Father's work, then that should also be our mindset (2:21-23). What good came of Jesus' suffering? Only our complete and total salvation and healing, duh (2:24-25)!

- 4) Regarding suffering, Peter continues his guidance in chapter 3 by bringing up marriage. (Yes, I was being cheeky. That was a joke. What? Didn't you hear the drum rimshot? Here it is then – *buh-dump-bump-tsssss.*) Notice Peter has been talking about loving and willingly submitting to authorities, whether governments or employers, even if those authorities aren't nice. Now he includes husbands in that authority list. If the husband and wife are both believers, great, but the wife should still submit (Greek, "to be under rank") to her husband. Peter's guideline has to do with *leading*, not *worth*. The verse has the sense of cooperating with the one charged with taking the lead (and Peter will get to the husband in a second, don't get all sensitive on me). If the wife is married to an unbeliever, her loving, gracious submission with godly character is a valuable witness to Jesus' reality and power. She may very well win him to the Lord. The wife's character is her true beauty, not outward displays (3:3-6). *And for you, husbands* (See?), you are to treat your lovely wife with honor and understanding as a fellow believer. Tell me, husbands, are you sure you want to hurt Jesus' child? Who do you think will hold you accountable, your wife or Jesus? By the way, Peter says the Lord won't listen to your prayers if you're not getting along with your wife (3:7). Ouch.
- 5) Finally, Peter addresses everyone in the body – stop doing evil, do good, and seek peace. Remember, God rewards us according to our behavior (3:8-12).

But what if we suffer even though we're doing good? Is that fair? No, it's not. Get over it. Generally speaking, the world doesn't hurt people who do good but not always. Sadly, that's the way the world works. However, Jesus blesses you for remaining godly under persecution (3:14). Peter tells us to be ready for the suffering of persecution, prepared to share why we are the way we are, with gentleness and reverence so we don't give anyone a reason to hate us other than our relationship with Jesus (3:15-17). We're to follow His example (3:18-4:1).

Now we come to another "therefore." Because Jesus suffered for us, let's be willing to suffer for Him. Believe me; we've received the better deal. We suffer singly. Jesus suffered for a multitude. But the suffering Peter talks about here is not suffering imposed by ungodly governments or people. It's suffering caused by us refusing to sin. Let's face it, denying what we want can be a pain, and sometimes it's a lot of pain. When we're saved, we move from the ungodly world of those who don't know God and do terrible things

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that cater to their pleasures into God's kingdom, where we live to serve our King's pleasure. Of course, the world hates God's people! We convict them of their sin; they see you as a killjoy. But don't worry. They'll eventually have to give an account for themselves if they don't come to Jesus by the time they die or He returns (4:4-5).

That said, Peter tells us not to be surprised when persecution and troubles come "as if something unusual were happening to you" (4:12). Our encouragement is that we share in the same rejection and suffering Jesus went through. He knows what we're going through, and His Spirit is with us in our suffering (4:13-15). If we're suffering, let it be because we're looking like Jesus, not because we're doing evil. Also, suffering comes because God is using the world to judge His people and test their genuineness before Jesus comes to judge the world. Judgment begins at home before it moves outside to the neighborhood. What good would it do to judge the world while God's people are like the lost world? Therefore, our Father will deal with us first.

In keeping with the "How authorities should act and how we're to respond to them" theme, Peter moves to elder-congregation relations. My takeaway is that leaders should not consider their function just a job to earn money. It's a call to lead by example, being willing servants, not overbearing lords. To make it easier for the leaders trying their best, the congregation should submit themselves to their leadership as a wife is called to submit to her husband. Mutual humility is the guiding principle. Why? Because "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (5:5). Say, congregation member, how are you blessing your pastor/elders/leaders? Hey, leaders! Is caring for and protecting Jesus' sheep your job or your passion? Time for heart checks for everybody.

Speaking of being humble, no matter what's going on, peace or persecution, stay humble under God's hand. I know. It's tempting to lash out against those who are being abusive. Please don't do it. Stay humble, and the Lord will eventually exalt you in their eyes, either now or in the future. In the meantime, give the Lord your cares, resist temptation, and stay faithful, for the King watches over you (5:6-9)!

Peter signs off with a salute from the believers in "Babylon," a reference to Rome because of its wickedness. May we also be encouraged and receive the true grace of God. "Stand firm in it!"

## INSIGHT

What does Peter mean by "in which he (Jesus) also went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared" (3:19-20)? Some deep things aren't made clear

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by scripture, only implied. The Jewish mind would understand it because the Jews of Jesus's day were fairly well-versed in biblical and extra-biblical writings.

- 1) "The spirits in prison who in the past were disobedient" refers to wicked people who died in the Flood. The more extensive reference is to all wicked people who had died from the beginning until Jesus' crucifixion. According to Jewish thinking (as documented in the book of 1 Enoch), Sheol (the place of the dead) was divided into two compartments – one for the wicked and one for the righteous – because the righteous should not suffer the torment the wicked do. Both holding cells were meant to keep the spirits of the departed until ultimate judgment was established, i.e., punishment for the wicked and reward for the righteous. The place of the righteous dead was called Paradise (like Eden) or Abraham's Bosom because righteous Abraham would be there dining in comfort, and it's customary to recline while eating a feast. During the meal, a person would lean back on the chest of the person behind them to speak with them. Therefore, the "holding cell" of the righteous was like a garden with a feast. *But*, the righteous could not enter God's presence in heaven because the payment for sin hadn't been made, which would have rendered them holy and fit for God's presence.
- 2) When Jesus paid for sin and declared the faithful righteous, it was finally possible to free them from Sheol and bring them into His Father's presence in heaven, before His throne. When Jesus said to the repentant thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), he was reassuring the thief that Jesus recognized and accepted the thief's repentance, declared him righteous, and they would meet in the place of the righteous dead. Jesus would go to Sheol before the thief as He would die first (John 19:32-33). Jesus descended to Sheol to proclaim forgiveness and freedom for the righteous and declare inevitable future judgment for the wicked dead. When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, scriptures say He led the righteous dead into heaven to reside there until Jesus resurrects their bodies when He returns to Earth (Ephesians 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

Wow! I bet that was one powerful sermon Jesus gave when He showed up in Sheol!



## December 21 : Scriptures 2 Peter 1-3

### SUMMARY

Welcome to Peter's second letter! This letter is very personal and similar to Paul's goodbye in his final letter, 2 Timothy. Scholars figure Peter wrote his letter in A.D. 64-65 before his death around A.D. 66 under Nero's persecution. He likely wrote to the same readers as a follow-up to his previous letter, and 2 Peter was probably written from Rome.

The theme in Peter's first letter was perseverance through suffering due to persecution. Peter stresses proper, good, and godly conduct in his second letter. He also writes as a spiritual shepherd to the "sheep and lambs" to guard against false teachers, their false teachings, and wicked ways of life. Peter was very concerned about what Jesus' far-flung Gentile and Jewish followers were listening to, learning, and living.

Peter also stresses Jesus' return as God's Judge. With Jesus' return in mind, believers should work on their spiritual maturity and trust in God. How would they do that? By following God's word, which Peter also stresses. So let's get to it.

God has given us a lot – faith (1:1) and divine power (1:3) so we can have "life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness." Thank You, Jesus! Peter reminds us that because of all these things the Father has given us, we're to work on increasing character qualities that will keep us from being "useless" (Greek, "inactive, idle, lazy, averse from labor") and without the fruit produced by an active life with Jesus, i.e., good works for which we'll be judged and rewarded. It only makes sense. If you don't work at something, you'll never produce anything, and the person who produces nothing for the Lord has forgotten what Jesus has done for them (1:9).

What's the remedy? Get to work confirming that you're saved by producing works that prove you have a relationship with Jesus. Remaining active will keep you from stumbling (Greek, "failing") (1:10)! If we don't stumble and fall, we're sure to enter "into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

To back up his claim, Peter reminds us that he's not spouting "cleverly contrived myths" (as some would contend even today), but he was an *eyewitness* who got a sneak peek at Jesus' future majesty along with James and John. Peter refers to the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9), where Jesus' divine glory shone forth from His human body. A popular preacher has said, "The man with the experience is never at the mercy of the man with an argument." Peter not only saw Jesus' divine majesty but

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heard the Father speak audible words (1:17). God's written word confirms Peter's testimony through His prophets (1:19), and Peter tells us we had better pay attention to those words. They aren't just a prophet's words generated from his mind. Because God inspired the prophets, their words are God's, so we had better listen and heed them.

*However*, Peter says these false teachers speak their false words in contrast to God's true word. Like the false prophets of old (Jeremiah 28:1), these false teachers are infiltrating the community of God's people and spreading heresies (Greek, "choice, opinion," words of their own choosing, not God's words).

First, their teaching has gone so far as even to deny Jesus (2:1). This false teacher label likely refers to non-believing Jews who had begun influencing congregations and individuals. Or he could be referring to believing Jews who were Judaizers, saying Jesus' sacrifice was not enough to secure a person's salvation and that male believers should also be circumcised as a conversion sign. Denying Jesus will destroy these false teachers, "But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:33) and "No one who denies the Son has the Father; he who confesses the Son has the Father as well" (1 John 2:23).

Sadly, Peter predicts that many believers will succumb to the false teachers' "fake news" and adopt their "depraved ways and the way of truth will be maligned because of them" (2:2). Yes, false teaching leads people into ungodly living. Examples of such today would be Prosperity Gospel preachers teaching falsehoods that lead people into greed and idolatry, and so-called Bible teachers that teach what God says is evil is good, such as cohabitation, homosexuality, and abortion. Rather than relay God's truth, these false teachers create myths and share opinions to exploit people. Sadly, the same "false teaching for financial exploitation" garbage is happening in today's global Christian community. Peter writes that those who do such things are doomed.

How does Peter know this? Because He knows God's word. He knows about the supernatural beings that descended from the spiritual realm and took on flesh to have sex with human women and the abominations they spawned, the Nephilim ("Fallen Ones"). As if a fallen human wasn't bad enough, imagine supernatural genetics and traits blended in. The Nephilim were blood-thirsty, vicious giants that ravaged the earth until God stopped it with the Flood (Genesis 6-8). The Nephilim were drowned, and the outlaw Watchers were "cast into hell, delivered...in chains of utter darkness to be kept for judgment" (2:4). Peter also knows God's word about His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah for the inhabitants' utter wickedness. Peter reassures us that the Lord knows how to rescue the righteous and deal with the wicked, especially the false teachers.

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Peter lets loose a harsh condemnation on the false teachers, describing their sinful natures and behaviors. They do things not even angels would dare to do (2:10-11)! Why? Because these teachers are animalistic, following their urges, brazenly sinning in broad daylight (2:13). They've sold themselves and their ministry for gain like Balaam did (2:15; Numbers 22-24), and as in Balaam's story, donkeys have more sense and restraint than the jackasses Peter is rebuking (2:16).

Peter goes on to describe the false teachers' condition. He points out that the hallmarks of a false teacher are their ungodly, selfish, and sinful behaviors (2:17-19). It doesn't matter that some of them profess to follow Jesus. Their true nature shines through – they return to their sin as a dog (an unclean animal) goes back to eat its vomit, or a cleansed pig (an unclean animal not fit to consume) goes back to wallow in the mud. Wow! As Peter scorches them in this part, I can almost feel the heat of his passion as a shepherd protecting his sheep from the wolves.

What do these false teachers have to look forward to for leading God's people astray and taking advantage of them? Jesus' return in the last days. Peter reminds us in chapter 3 that God's written word (the prophets) and Jesus' spoken word all foretell that a sign of the end is the appearance of false teachers, just like Peter described in chapter 2. Because Peter sees false teachers popping up and weaseling their way into the community of believers, this affirms to him that Jesus' return is near.

When Peter wrote this letter, about thirty years had passed, and Jesus hadn't returned. The more time passed during the days of the Early Church, the more fervently the belief in Jesus' coming grew. However, as more time passed and there was no Jesus, that fervency waned. Disappointment began to set in (disappointment comes from unmet expectations). Christians had to shift their understanding of the End Times to reconcile Jesus' promise and the reality they were experiencing. Even if Peter was off in his expectation, God's word and Jesus' promises remain solid, for God never lies. So, as I read this part, I embrace Peter's approach:

- 1) At the End, many people will scoff about Jesus' return because of their evil desires (3:3-4).
- 2) They will deliberately ignore that God previously punished the world for its rampant sin (Noah's Flood). However, the next time it will be via fire (3:5-7).
- 3) Even though there's a delay (See? Peter is aware of the growing doubt), the Father sets the timing, not us (3:8-9).
- 4) When the End comes, it will be sudden and catastrophic, with everything being burned up (3:10-11).

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- 5) We should work on those things that will last through God's fiery judgment, "holy conduct and godliness." We don't need to fear and can await the End with trust (3:12-13).

Therefore (because of what he just laid out), Peter tells us to work on removing the spots and blemishes from our lives. Spots and blemishes mean things we should be without those sins that stain us and open us up to God's blame for doing wrong (3:14).

In closing his letter, Peter refers to Paul. He says Paul writes the same things about God's delay and the need to remain patient (3:15-16), even though some twist Paul's words because of how he writes and teaches. Remarkably, Peter puts Paul's words equal to inspired scripture (3:16). That's quite a commendation from Jesus' primary disciple!

Peter signs off by encouraging the disciples (and us) to do two simple things: be on guard against the false teachers of our day and to grow in God's grace and knowledge of Jesus that shows us how we're to live godly lives. Amen!

### INSIGHT

There are so many who claim to be Bible teachers, especially on the internet. I can't tell you how many times someone has come to me, breathlessly explaining some radical new teaching about Jesus or His word. Sometimes the unique teaching is good, sometimes it's a little off base because of poor scholarship, and sometimes it's downright spiritually dangerous. How do I know? Because I've spent years reading, teaching, and preaching the Bible. I haven't arrived and never will because eternity will open up more revelation about our Triune God and His ways.

However, we have all we need to live as Jesus wants if only we would do so. Further, knowing God's word thoroughly – *including the entire Bible* – can lead us through the weeds of made-up myths and opinions false teachers spew for profit today.

We must take Peter and Paul's words to heart. Peter: "Be on your guard, so that you are not led away by the error of lawless people and fall from your own stable position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:17-18). Paul: "Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).