THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

The King's Better Promise

Hebrews, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Better Promise: The Letter to the Hebrews, Unfiltered

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used with permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Hebrews is the first book in this series that Paul probably didn't write, but the saying is staying.

Hebrews is a mystery. Nobody knows for sure who wrote it. It doesn't start like a letter, with a name and a greeting. It doesn't say exactly who it was written to, or where. And it's full of things that can seem strange to modern readers: angels, priests, animal sacrifices, a tent in the desert, and a mysterious king named Melchizedek who appears out of nowhere.

But don't let that scare you off. Hebrews was written to people who were tired. Following Jesus had cost them a lot. Some had been insulted, some had lost their property, and some had been thrown in prison. A few had already stopped showing up. They were tempted to quit, and to go back to something that felt safer and more familiar.

The writer's answer is one word, repeated over and over: better. Jesus is better than the angels. Better than Moses. A better priest, with a better sacrifice, a better covenant, and better promises. Whatever you might go back to, Jesus is better. So don't quit. Hold on. Run your race with your eyes on Him.

Hebrews also contains some of the most comforting verses in the Bible, about a Savior who understands exactly what it's like to be

tempted, and who invites you to come to God with confidence. And it contains the famous Hall of Faith, a list of ordinary people who trusted God when it was hard. If you've ever felt like giving up, this book is for you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all thirteen chapters of Hebrews, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what the writer is saying in plain language and adds background about the Old Testament, the Jewish temple and its worship, and the world of the first readers.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains the mystery of who wrote Hebrews, who it was written to, and when. It also explains the tabernacle, priests, sacrifices, and the Day of Atonement, which you'll need to understand much of the letter. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes Hebrews sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through Hebrews chapter by chapter. I've quoted the letter sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

The authorship of Hebrews is unknown. I've presented the main proposals, including Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Priscilla, and Luke, fairly, along with the early church's own uncertainty. I refer to the author simply as the writer.

The warning passages in 6:4–6 and 10:26–31 are understood very differently by different Christian traditions. I've presented the main views fairly without endorsing one, and included a gentle word for anxious readers who fear they have gone too far. If your teen struggles with that fear, please talk with them, and with your pastor if needed.

Hebrews says a great deal about the old and new covenants. I've tried to explain its argument faithfully while making clear that it gives no license for contempt toward Jewish people or Judaism. The writer was very likely Jewish himself, as were Jesus and the apostles, and the letter honors the heroes of Israel's faith.

Several passages are highlighted as especially relevant for teens: the living and active word of God (4:12), a high priest who understands our weakness (4:15–16), the Hall of Faith (chapter 11), and running the race with our eyes on Jesus (12:1–2).

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will fix their eyes on Jesus, and keep running.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

A Sermon in Writing

Most New Testament letters begin by naming the writer and the readers, followed by a greeting. Hebrews doesn't. It jumps straight in with a dramatic opening about God speaking through His Son. It reads less like a letter and more like a sermon. In fact, near the end, the writer calls it a word of exhortation (13:22), the same phrase used in Acts 13:15 for a sermon in a synagogue. It may have been preached, or written to be read aloud to a congregation.

But it ends like a letter, with personal news, greetings, and a blessing. So Hebrews is probably best described as a sermon sent as a letter, to a particular group of believers the writer knew and cared about. And it's a long sermon, but the writer calls it short (13:22). Preachers haven't changed much.

Who Wrote It?

The honest answer is that nobody knows. The letter never names its author. In the early church, opinions differed. Many Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially around Alexandria in Egypt, believed Paul wrote it, and it was eventually included among his letters in many ancient manuscripts and in the King James Version's title. Clement of Alexandria, around AD 200, suggested that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. Meanwhile, many Christians in the western part of the

empire, including Rome, doubted that Paul was the author. The North African writer Tertullian thought it was Barnabas.

Around AD 230, the great scholar Origen of Alexandria noted that the thoughts sounded like Paul's but the style didn't, and that some said Clement of Rome or Luke had written it. Then he made a famous statement, preserved by the historian Eusebius: who wrote the letter, only God truly knows.

The Candidates

Paul: The letter mentions Timothy (13:23) and has ideas similar to Paul's. But its Greek style is very different from his, more polished and elaborate, and the writer says he received the message from those who had heard Jesus (2:3), while Paul insisted he received his gospel directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:12). Most scholars today think Paul didn't write it.

Apollos: Martin Luther suggested him. Apollos was a Jewish believer from Alexandria, known for his eloquence and knowledge of the Scriptures (Acts 18:24–28), which fits Hebrews' style and its skillful use of the Old Testament. Many modern scholars find this an attractive guess.

Barnabas: Tertullian's choice. Barnabas was a Levite, from the priestly tribe (Acts 4:36), which might explain the letter's interest in priests and sacrifices, and his name means son of encouragement, which fits a word of exhortation.

Priscilla: The German scholar Adolf von Harnack suggested that Priscilla, who taught Apollos with her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26), wrote it, and that her name was left off because a woman author might not have been accepted. One objection is that in 11:32 the

writer uses a masculine form when speaking of himself in Greek, though some answer that this could be conventional.

Others: Luke, Clement of Rome, Silas, and Philip have also been suggested.

It's a fascinating puzzle. But the early church accepted Hebrews into the New Testament because its message was recognized as true and from God, not because everyone agreed on its author. In this book, I simply call the author the writer.

Who Were the Hebrews?

The title To the Hebrews was added later; it's not part of the original text. But it's a good guess. The letter assumes its readers know the Old Testament very well and care deeply about the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the covenant with Moses. Most scholars think the first readers were mainly Jewish Christians, though some think they included Gentile believers who had been taught the Jewish Scriptures.

We know a few things about them. They'd been believers for a while (5:12). In the past, they had suffered public insults and persecution, some had been imprisoned, and others had had their property taken, and they had stood firm with joy (10:32–34). But now some were growing tired, drifting, and skipping church gatherings (10:25). And they seem to have been tempted to turn back from following Jesus to the familiar practices of Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution.

Where Were They?

The writer sends greetings from those from Italy (13:24). That could mean the writer was in Italy, or that Italians living somewhere else

were sending greetings home. Many scholars think the readers lived in or near Rome. The persecution described in 10:32–34 could fit the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians from Rome under Emperor Claudius around AD 49, mentioned in Acts 18:2. The earliest writer known to quote Hebrews, Clement of Rome, lived there too. Others think the readers were in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Judea, near the temple. We can't be sure.

Before or After AD 70?

In AD 70, the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. The sacrifices the Old Testament commanded came to an end and have never resumed. You'd think that would come up in a letter all about priests and sacrifices, and about how Jesus' sacrifice made the old ones unnecessary. But Hebrews never mentions it.

Many scholars conclude that Hebrews was written before AD 70, probably in the 60s, while sacrifices were still being offered. The writer even speaks of the priests as still serving, in the present tense (8:4; 10:1–3, 11), and asks whether the sacrifices would not have stopped if they had worked. Others point out that the writer always talks about the tabernacle, the tent in the wilderness described in the Old Testament, not the temple in Jerusalem, so the present tense may simply describe what Scripture says. They date it later, between AD 70 and about 95. It can't be much later than that, because Clement of Rome seems to quote it in a letter usually dated around AD 96.

Better

If you want one word to sum up Hebrews, it's better. The writer uses it over and over. Jesus is better than the angels (1:4). He brings a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22; 8:6), based on better

promises (8:6), through better sacrifices (9:23). Believers have better possessions (10:34) and look forward to a better country (11:16) and a better resurrection (11:35).

The writer isn't saying that the Old Testament, Moses, or the priests were bad. They were good gifts from God. But they pointed forward to something even better: Jesus. Going back to them, after Jesus has come, would be like going back to the trailer after seeing the movie.

The Tabernacle

To understand Hebrews, you need to know about the tabernacle. After God rescued Israel from Egypt, He gave Moses instructions to build a portable tent where He would dwell among His people (Exodus 25–31). It stood in a courtyard with an altar for sacrifices and a large bronze basin for washing.

The tent itself had two rooms. The first, the Holy Place, held a golden lampstand, a table with bread, and a small altar for burning incense. A thick curtain separated it from the inner room, the Most Holy Place, sometimes called the Holy of Holies. Inside was the ark of the covenant, a gold-covered chest containing the stone tablets of the law. Its lid, called the atonement cover or mercy seat, had two golden cherubim on it. This was where God's presence dwelled in a special way. Later, Solomon built a permanent temple in Jerusalem with the same basic design, and it was later rebuilt and expanded.

Priests and Sacrifices

God appointed Aaron, Moses' brother, and his descendants to serve as priests, from the tribe of Levi. They offered sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine, burned incense, and represented the people before God. Every day, morning and evening, sacrifices were offered.

People also brought sacrifices to give thanks, to keep promises, and to seek forgiveness when they had sinned.

The sacrifices showed that sin is serious: it brings death, and forgiveness is costly. They also showed that God provides a way back to Him. Hebrews' argument is that these sacrifices were real but temporary, like shadows pointing to the real thing.

The Day of Atonement

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur in Hebrew, the high priest did something he did on no other day. After careful preparation and sacrifices for his own sins, he went behind the curtain into the Most Holy Place, carrying the blood of a sacrifice, and sprinkled it on the atonement cover to cover the sins of the whole nation. Then a second goat, called the scapegoat, had the people's sins symbolically placed on its head and was sent away into the wilderness (Leviticus 16).

This was the holiest day of the year. Only one man, on one day, could enter God's presence in the Most Holy Place, and only with blood. Hebrews 9 and 10 build directly on this background. Yom Kippur is still the holiest day of the year for Jewish people today, observed with fasting and prayer.

How Hebrews Reads the Old Testament

Hebrews quotes the Old Testament constantly, more than almost any other New Testament book. Its quotations usually follow the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by many Jews in the first century, which is why they sometimes differ slightly from the wording in your Old Testament. The writer especially loves the Psalms, quoting Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 95,

Psalm 110, and others, and builds long arguments on passages like Jeremiah 31.

The writer reads the Old Testament as pointing forward to Jesus. Its people, places, and practices are like sketches or shadows of what God would do in Christ. This way of reading Scripture is sometimes called typology.

A Word about Judaism

Hebrews argues that the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant given through Moses. Sadly, over the centuries, some Christians have used passages like this to look down on, insult, or even persecute Jewish people. That's a terrible misuse of the letter. The writer was very likely Jewish, writing to Jewish believers, and the book's heroes, in chapter 11, are Israel's heroes. Hebrews is an argument among people who all honored Israel's Scriptures, about how God's promises to Israel had been fulfilled. Christians and Jews today disagree about Jesus, and it's fine to discuss those differences honestly. But contempt for Jewish people has no place in the Christian faith.

The Warning Passages

Hebrews contains five passages that warn readers about the danger of drifting away from Jesus (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:26–39; 12:14–29). Two of them, in chapters 6 and 10, are among the most debated passages in the Bible. Christians from different traditions understand them in different ways, and we'll look at the main views when we get there. If you're someone who worries about whether you've gone too far for God to forgive you, there's a section in chapter 6 written especially for you.

The Map

Chapters 1–2: Jesus is greater than the angels, and He became fully human to rescue us.

Chapters 3–4: Jesus is greater than Moses; don't harden your hearts, but enter God's rest.

Chapters 5–7: Jesus is our great high priest, a priest like Melchizedek; a warning, and an anchor for the soul.

Chapters 8–10: A new covenant, a better sanctuary, and a once-for-all sacrifice; draw near to God and don't give up.

Chapter 11: The Hall of Faith.

Chapters 12–13: Run the race with your eyes on Jesus; how to live as God's people; final words.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7
1 Better Than Angels *1* 16
2 Our Brother *2* 21
3 Today *3* 26
4 Sharper Than Any Sword *4* 30
5 A Priest Who Understands *5* 35
6 An Anchor for the Soul *6* 39
7 The Mysterious King *7* 44
8 A New Covenant *8* 49
9 Once for All *9* 53
10 Draw Near *10* 58
11 The Hall of Faith *11* 64
12 Run the Race *12* 71
13 The Same Forever *13* 77
Now What? The Bottom Line 83

CHAPTER 1

Better Than Angels

Hebrews 1

Hebrews opens with one of the most magnificent sentences in the Bible. In Greek, verses 1 to 4 are a single, carefully crafted sentence. The writer starts with history. Long ago, God spoke to His people many times and in many different ways through the prophets. But now, in the final era of history, God has spoken through His Son.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God Speaks**
>
> Think about all the ways God spoke in the Old Testament: through a burning bush, a still small voice, dreams, visions, the law on stone tablets, prophets who acted out messages, and poets who wrote psalms. The writer says all of that was real, but partial, like pieces of a puzzle. In Jesus, God has given us the full picture. If you want to know what God is like, what He thinks, and how He feels about you, look at Jesus. He isn't just a messenger from God. He is God's final word.

Then the writer piles up seven amazing statements about the Son. God has made Him the heir of everything. Through Him, God created the universe. He is the radiance of God's glory, like light shining from the sun. He is the exact representation of God's being. He holds everything together by His powerful word. He made purification for sins. And then He sat down at God's right hand in heaven.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Exact Representation**

The Greek word translated exact representation is charakter, which gives us the English word character. It was used for the mark a stamp or seal leaves in wax, or the image stamped on a coin. Every detail of the stamp shows up in the impression. The writer is saying that Jesus perfectly shows us who God is. Jesus said the same thing: anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9).

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Sat Down**

Notice the last thing the writer says: after Jesus made purification for sins, He sat down. That's a big deal, and the writer will come back to it later (10:11–12). In the tabernacle, there were no chairs for the priests. Their work was never finished; there was always another sacrifice to offer. But Jesus sat down, because His work was complete. There's nothing left to add to what He did for you.

The writer says the Son became far greater than the angels, just as the name He inherited is greater than theirs. And then he spends the rest of the chapter proving it, with seven quotations from the Old Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Angels?**

Why would the writer spend a whole chapter comparing Jesus to angels? Jewish tradition taught that angels were involved in giving the law to Moses at Mount Sinai (see 2:2; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). Angels were seen as powerful, glorious beings who served in God's presence. Some people may have been tempted to see Jesus as just another angel, or to give angels too much honor. The writer wants to make it clear that Jesus is in a completely different category. Angels serve God. Jesus is God's Son.

First, the writer quotes Psalm 2: God never said to any angel that He was His Son and that He had become His Father. And he quotes God's promise to King David that his descendant would be God's son (2 Samuel 7:14). The NIV footnotes list both sources. These passages

were originally about Israel's kings, but the writer sees them as ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, the true Son and King.

Then he says that when God sends His firstborn into the world, God commands all the angels to worship Him. The NIV footnote says this comes from Deuteronomy 32:43, in a version found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint. If angels worship the Son, He must be greater than they are.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Firstborn**
>
> In the Bible, firstborn doesn't always mean born first. It often means the one with the highest rank, the heir with the most honor. God called Israel His firstborn son (Exodus 4:22), and promised that David's line would be His firstborn, the most exalted of kings (Psalm 89:27). When Hebrews calls Jesus the firstborn, it doesn't mean that Jesus was created. The writer has just said that the universe was created through Him. It means He holds the highest place.

The writer contrasts the angels with the Son. Psalm 104 describes angels as winds and flames of fire, powerful but serving. But Psalm 45, addressed to the king, says that the Son's throne will last forever, and even calls Him God. And Psalm 102 says that the Lord set the earth on its foundations, and that the heavens will wear out like old clothes, but He will always stay the same. The writer applies those words to Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus Is God**
>
> Hebrews 1 is one of the strongest passages in the New Testament about who Jesus is. The writer says that the universe was created through Him, that He holds it together, that He perfectly represents God, that angels worship Him, and he applies to Him Old Testament passages that speak of God Himself. At the same time, the writer distinguishes the Son from the Father. Christians have summarized this teaching in the doctrine of the Trinity: one God,

eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's a mystery, but it's at the heart of the Christian faith.

Finally, the writer quotes Psalm 110, the Old Testament passage most often quoted in the New Testament. God tells the king to sit at His right hand until God makes his enemies a footstool for his feet. God never said that to an angel. Angels, the writer concludes, are spirits who serve, sent to help the people who will inherit salvation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Angels on Assignment**

The Bible says a lot less about angels than many people think, and a lot of popular ideas about angels come from movies, art, and imagination rather than Scripture. But the Bible does say that angels are real, that they serve God, and that He sends them to help His people. Hebrews 13:2 even suggests some people have welcomed angels without knowing it. You don't need to pray to angels or try to contact them. But it's good to know that God sends help you can't always see.

KEY VERSE

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Hebrews says God has spoken to us through His Son. What does that mean for how you get to know God?
2. If Jesus is the exact representation of God, what does His life tell you about what God is like?
3. Why do you think it matters that Jesus sat down after providing purification for sins?
4. What ideas about angels have you picked up from movies or culture? How do they compare to what the Bible says?

TRY THIS *Read one of the Gospels this month, maybe Mark, and every time you read about something Jesus does, ask: what does this show me about God?*

CHAPTER 2

Our Brother

Hebrews 2

After all that talk about how great Jesus is, the writer gives his first warning. Because of all this, we need to pay very careful attention to what we've heard, so that we don't drift away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Drifting**
>
> The word the writer uses for drift away was used for a boat that slips away from the dock because no one tied it up properly. Drifting doesn't take any effort. You don't decide to drift. You just stop paying attention, and the current does the rest. A lot of people don't walk away from Jesus in one dramatic moment. They just slowly stop praying, stop reading the Bible, stop going to church, stop caring. Months later, they look up and realize they're far from shore. What keeps you tied to the dock?

The writer reasons this way. The message God gave through angels, the law, was binding, and people who broke it were punished. So how will we escape if we ignore a salvation as great as this one? This message was announced first by Jesus Himself, and was confirmed to us by people who heard Him. God confirmed it too, with signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Second Generation**
>
> Notice the writer's words in verse 3. He received the message from people who had heard Jesus. So he wasn't one of the original disciples. He was part of the second generation of believers. That's one reason most scholars think

> Paul didn't write Hebrews, since Paul insisted that he received the gospel directly from Jesus (Galatians 1:11–12). It also means that the writer was in the same position you are: believing in Jesus because of what others told him. He's a good example of how faith gets passed down.

Then the writer returns to the angels. God didn't put the world to come under the control of angels. Instead, he quotes Psalm 8, which marvels that God pays attention to human beings at all. God made humans a bit lower than the angels for a while, gave them glory and honor as a crown, and placed everything under their control.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Psalm 8**
>
> Psalm 8 is a song about the amazing place God gave humanity in creation. When David looked up at the night sky, he felt tiny. Why would the God who made all of that care about people? And yet God gave humans glory and responsibility over His world (Genesis 1:26–28). The NIV footnotes show that the psalm's language can be translated about humanity in general or about a particular son of man. The writer seems to use both: Psalm 8 describes what humans were meant to be, and Jesus is the one human being who has fully become it.

The writer admits something obvious. Right now, we don't see everything under humanity's control. The world is broken. People suffer, nature is unpredictable, and death still wins. But then he writes, "But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **But We Do See Jesus**
>
> This might be the most hopeful phrase in the chapter. When you look at the world, you see a lot that's wrong. When you look at your own life, you probably do too. But we do see Jesus. He has already gone through suffering

and death, and come out on the other side, crowned with glory. Where He is, we're headed. When things look hopeless, look at Him.

God, the writer says, wanted to lead a huge family of children into glory, so it was fitting that He would make Jesus, the pioneer who leads them to salvation, perfect by means of suffering. That doesn't mean Jesus was ever sinful or flawed. It means He was made fully qualified to be our Savior by going through everything we go through.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pioneer**

The Greek word for pioneer can mean a leader, a founder, or a trailblazer, someone who goes ahead and opens a way for others to follow. Imagine people trapped in a burning building, and a firefighter who goes in, finds them, and leads them out through the smoke. Jesus went ahead of us, through suffering and death, and opened a path to God's presence. The writer will use the same word again in 12:2.

Jesus and the people He makes holy are one family. That's why Jesus is proud to call them His brothers and sisters. The NIV footnote explains that the Greek word refers to believers, both men and women. The writer quotes Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8 to show Jesus speaking of God's people as His brothers, sisters, and children.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Ashamed**

Jesus isn't ashamed to call you His brother or sister. Think about that. He knows everything about you, including the things you're most embarrassed about. And He still claims you as family. You might feel ashamed of yourself sometimes, but He isn't ashamed of you.

Since God's children are flesh and blood, Jesus became flesh and blood too. By His death, He broke the power of the devil, who held the power of death, and set free the people who had been slaves all their lives to their fear of death.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Afraid of Dying**

A lot of people are afraid of death, even if they don't talk about it. Some people avoid thinking about it at all. Others are terrified of it. Fear of death can control people's lives in ways they don't realize. Hebrews says that Jesus came to free us from that fear. He went into death and came out the other side, and He'll bring us through too. Death is still sad and still painful, but for those who belong to Jesus, it is not the end.

Jesus didn't come to help angels, the writer says, but Abraham's descendants. So He had to become like His brothers and sisters in every way, so that He could serve as a high priest who is both merciful and faithful, and make atonement for the people's sins. This is the first time the writer calls Jesus a high priest, the idea that will dominate much of the rest of the letter.

And because Jesus went through suffering in His own temptations, He's able to help people who are being tempted.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Gets It**

Jesus didn't just pretend to be human. He was really tempted. He felt hunger, exhaustion, loneliness, grief, pain, and the pull to take the easy way out (Matthew 4:1–11; 26:36–46). The difference is that He never gave in. That means He understands what you're going through better than anyone, because He felt the full force of temptation without ever giving way. When you're struggling with temptation, you don't have to hide from Him. He's the one who can help most.

KEY VERSE

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What are some ways people drift away from God without meaning to? What helps you stay anchored?
2. Psalm 8 says humans were made for glory. How does Jesus show what a human life was meant to be?
3. How does it make you feel that Jesus isn't ashamed to call you His brother or sister?
4. What temptation do you face most often? How might knowing that Jesus understands it help?

TRY THIS *Pick one specific thing that tends to pull you toward drifting, whether a habit, a schedule, or a set of friends. This week, add one thing that keeps you tied to the dock instead: a daily prayer, a Bible reading plan, or a friend who'll check in on you.*

CHAPTER 3

Today

Hebrews 3

The writer addresses his readers as holy brothers and sisters, people with a calling from heaven. And he tells them to fix their thoughts on Jesus, whom he calls our apostle and high priest.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Apostle and High Priest**
>
> This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called an apostle. An apostle is someone sent with a message. A high priest represents people before God. So Jesus is both: He came from God to us, bringing God's message, and He represents us before God. He's the bridge between God and humanity from both sides.

Now the writer compares Jesus with Moses. For Jewish readers, there was no greater figure in history than Moses. He led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, received the law at Mount Sinai, and built the tabernacle. God Himself said Moses was faithful in all His house (Numbers 12:7, as the NIV footnote notes).

The writer doesn't criticize Moses at all. Jesus was faithful, just as Moses was. But Jesus deserves more honor than Moses, the same way the builder of a house deserves more honor than the house itself. Moses was a faithful servant in God's house. Jesus is the faithful Son in charge of God's house. And that house is us, if we keep holding on to our confidence and our hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Honoring Moses**

Hebrews is careful to honor Moses. He's one of the heroes in the Hall of Faith in chapter 11. The writer's point isn't that Moses was bad, but that Moses was pointing to someone greater. Moses himself promised that God would raise up another prophet like him (Deuteronomy 18:15). It's a good model for disagreement: you can say that something is better without trashing what came before.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God's House**

When the writer says we are God's house, he doesn't mean a building. In the Old Testament, God's house could mean His dwelling, the tabernacle or temple, or His household, the family of Israel. The writer means the people of God. The church isn't a place you go. It's a people you belong to.

Then comes the second warning. The writer quotes Psalm 95, a psalm that was often sung in worship in the synagogue and the temple. In it, God warns His people: if you hear His voice today, don't harden your hearts, like your ancestors did in the wilderness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wilderness Generation**

The psalm refers to the Israelites who left Egypt with Moses. They had seen incredible miracles: the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from a rock. But when they reached the edge of the promised land and heard that the people living there were strong, they panicked and refused to go in (Numbers 13–14). God said that generation would wander in the wilderness for forty years, and none of the adults except Joshua and Caleb would enter the land. They had seen God's power for themselves and still didn't trust Him.

Then the writer applies the psalm to his readers. Watch out, he says, so that no one among you has a heart full of sin and unbelief that turns its back on the living God. Instead, encourage each other every day, while it's still today, so that sin's deceitfulness doesn't harden anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hardened Hearts**

How does a heart become hard? Usually not all at once. It's a little like calluses on your hands. Every time you ignore your conscience, every time you hear God's voice and say not now, every time you make excuses for something you know is wrong, your heart gets a little tougher. Sin is deceitful. It promises freedom and fun, and it delivers emptiness. It whispers that it's not a big deal, that you'll stop later, that nobody's getting hurt. The longer you listen, the harder it is to hear God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Encourage One Another Daily**

The writer's answer to hardened hearts is surprisingly simple: encourage each other every day. Not once a week at church. Every day. That's one reason Christian friends matter so much. You need people in your life who'll remind you of the truth, ask how you're really doing, pray for you, and tell you when you're drifting. And they need you to do the same for them. A text, a word at lunch, or a quick prayer together can help keep a heart soft.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Today**

The word today shows up over and over in this passage. God speaks today. Respond today. Encourage one another today. It's easy to say, I'll get serious about God later, after high school, after I've had some fun, when I'm older. But today is the only day you have. The writer says that if you hear God's voice, now is the time to respond.

The writer asks a series of questions. Who heard God and rebelled? Wasn't it all the people Moses led out of Egypt? With whom was God angry for forty years? Wasn't it with those who sinned and died in the desert? And who were the people God swore would never enter His rest? Wasn't it those who disobeyed? So, the writer concludes, they couldn't enter, because they didn't believe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unbelief**

The writer connects disobedience and unbelief. The Israelites didn't just break a rule. They refused to trust God. That's the root problem. When we

don't believe God is good and that His way is best, disobedience follows naturally. And when we do trust Him, obedience becomes something we want to do. Faith and obedience go together, as chapter 11 will show.

KEY VERSE

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 3:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between honoring Moses and following Jesus? Why does the writer do both?
2. What are some ways sin is deceitful? What lies does it tell people your age?
3. Who encourages you in your faith? Whom do you encourage?
4. Is there anything God has been asking you to do that you keep putting off until later?

TRY THIS *Choose one Christian friend and commit to encouraging each other every day this week, even with a short text. Share a verse, a prayer request, or just ask how they're really doing.*

CHAPTER 4

Sharper Than Any Sword

Hebrews 4

The writer continues his warning from chapter 3. God's promise that His people can enter His rest is still open. So we should be careful that none of us misses out.

The good news was preached to us, just as it was to the Israelites in the wilderness. But hearing it didn't do them any good, because they didn't combine it with faith. The NIV footnote mentions a different reading in some manuscripts, but the point is the same: hearing God's message isn't enough. You have to trust it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Rest**
>
> What does the writer mean by God's rest? He uses the idea on several levels. For the Israelites, rest meant settling in the promised land after years of wandering. Then the writer points back further, to creation. When God finished creating, He rested on day seven (Genesis 2:2). And he points forward, to a rest that's still waiting for God's people. Most interpreters see it as both a present and a future reality: a rest we begin to enter now, by trusting Jesus instead of trying to earn God's favor, and a final rest when we're with Him forever.

The writer makes a clever argument. Psalm 95, written by David centuries after Joshua led Israel into the promised land, still tells people to listen to God's voice today. If Joshua had given the people

complete rest, God wouldn't have talked later about another day. So there must still be a Sabbath rest waiting for God's people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sabbath Rest**
>
> The word the writer uses for Sabbath rest in verse 9 appears nowhere else in the Bible. It connects God's rest with the weekly Sabbath, the day of rest God gave Israel (Exodus 20:8–11). Anyone who enters God's rest, the writer says, rests from their own work, just as God did. The NIV footnote says work could also be translated labor. In a culture that never stops, where your phone buzzes all night and there's always more to do, rest is a gift. God built rest into creation. He wants you to trust Him enough to stop. Many Christians practice a weekly day of rest and worship as a way of remembering that.

So, the writer says, let's work hard to get into God's rest, so that none of us falls by following the Israelites' example of disobedience. It's a little ironic: work hard to rest. But it makes sense. It takes effort to trust God, to stop striving, and to keep listening to His voice.

Then comes one of the most famous verses in Hebrews: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Alive and Active**
>
> Most books are just words on a page. You read them, you learn something, you put them down. The Bible is different. The writer says God's word is alive. It does things. When you read it, it reads you. It cuts through excuses, exposes motives you didn't know you had, comforts you when you're hurting, and challenges you when you're comfortable. Have you ever read a verse that felt like it was written just for you, at exactly the right moment? That's what the writer is talking about.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Deeper Than a Scalpel**

The writer isn't giving an anatomy lesson or teaching that soul and spirit are two separate parts of a person. He's using vivid pictures to say that God's word reaches deeper than anything else can, to the very core of who you are. A surgeon's scalpel can cut between joints and marrow. God's word cuts deeper, all the way into your thoughts and intentions.

No created thing can hide from God. Everything is uncovered and exposed before the eyes of the One we'll answer to. That could sound frightening. But the writer immediately follows it with the best news possible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fully Known**

Being completely seen can be terrifying. Most of us work hard to hide parts of ourselves, even from our closest friends. But God already sees everything, the thoughts you'd never say out loud, the things you've done that nobody knows about. And here's the amazing thing: He loves you anyway. Being fully known and fully loved is what every human heart longs for. In Jesus, you can have both.

Jesus, God's Son, is our great high priest, and He has gone up into heaven. So we should hold tight to the faith we confess. The NIV footnote says the Greek literally says that He has gone through the heavens, like the high priest going through the curtain into the Most Holy Place.

And this high priest isn't distant or cold. We don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses. We have one who faced every kind of temptation we face, without ever sinning. So we can come boldly to the throne where God gives grace, and we'll find mercy and the help we need, right when we need it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Understands**

Think about everything you might be tempted by: to lie to get out of trouble, to lash out when you're angry, to give in to lust, to fit in with the crowd, to give up when life is hard, to doubt that God cares. Jesus faced the same kinds of temptation. He didn't face every specific modern temptation, like social media, but He faced every kind of temptation. He knows what it's like to be tired, lonely, betrayed, misunderstood, and in pain. So when you go to Him, you're not talking to someone who can't relate. You're talking to the One who understands better than anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Throne of Grace**

In the ancient world, approaching a king's throne was dangerous. You didn't just walk in. Queen Esther risked her life to go before the king uninvited (Esther 4:11). But the writer says God's throne is a throne of grace, and we can approach it with confidence. Not because we're good enough, but because Jesus is our high priest. You can bring God anything: your sin, your mess, your questions, your fears. You'll find mercy for what you've done, and grace to help you with what you're facing. That's not just for when you're doing well. It's especially for your time of need.

KEY VERSE

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:15–16 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does rest mean to you? How could trusting God help you rest?
2. Have you ever read a Bible verse that seemed to speak directly to you? What happened?
3. How does it feel to know that God sees everything about you? Does that scare you or comfort you, or both?
4. What would it look like to approach God with confidence this week, about something you've been hiding or struggling with?

TRY THIS *Memorize Hebrews 4:15–16. The next time you're struggling with temptation or feel like you've failed, say it to yourself, and then actually talk to God about what's going on.*

CHAPTER 5

A Priest Who Understands

Hebrews 5

Now the writer explains what a high priest is. Every high priest is chosen from among the people to represent them before God, bringing gifts and offering sacrifices for sin. Because he's human and weak himself, he can deal gently with people who don't know better or who are going astray. In fact, he has to bring sacrifices for his own sin before he deals with anyone else's.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Weak Priests**
>
> The writer is honest about the Old Testament priests. They were sinners too. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins before he could offer one for the people (Leviticus 16:6, 11). That made them understanding, but it also limited them. Jesus is different. He understands our weakness completely, but He has no sin of His own to deal with.

And no one appoints himself high priest. God has to call him, just as He called Aaron. The same is true of Jesus. He didn't make Himself high priest. God appointed Him. The writer quotes Psalm 2 again, where God calls Him His Son, and then Psalm 110, where God declares that He will be a priest forever, like Melchizedek. We'll learn more about that mysterious figure in chapter 7.

Then the writer describes something remarkable. While Jesus lived on earth, He prayed with loud cries and tears to the Father, who had

the power to rescue Him from death. And God heard Him, because of His reverent submission.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Loud Cries and Tears**

This almost certainly refers to the night before Jesus was crucified, when He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. He was so overwhelmed that He said His soul was crushed with grief, and He asked the Father to take the cup of suffering away from Him, if possible. But He also prayed, not My will, but Yours be done (Mark 14:32–36; Luke 22:41–44). Jesus didn't pretend to be fine. He cried. He begged. He was honest with God about His pain. If you've ever cried out to God in desperation, Jesus knows exactly what that's like.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heard?**

The writer says God heard Jesus. But Jesus still died. So how was His prayer answered? God didn't save Jesus from dying, but He saved Him out of death, by raising Him from the dead. Sometimes God answers prayers in ways we don't expect. He doesn't always take us around suffering. Sometimes He takes us through it, to something better on the other side.

Even though Jesus was God's Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And once He was made perfect, He became the One through whom everyone who obeys Him receives salvation that lasts forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Learning Obedience**

How could Jesus learn obedience if He never disobeyed? The writer doesn't mean Jesus went from being disobedient to obedient. He means that Jesus experienced what obedience costs when it involves suffering. He learned it by doing it, the way an athlete learns endurance by running. Jesus' obedience was tested to the limit on the cross, and it held. Made perfect means fully qualified, complete, ready for His role as our Savior.

Then the writer interrupts himself. He has a lot more to say about Melchizedek, but it's hard to explain, because his readers have

become slow to learn. By now, they should be teachers, but they need someone to teach them the basics all over again. They need milk, not solid food.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Milk and Solid Food**
>
> Babies drink milk. That's normal and healthy. But if a fifteen-year-old could only drink from a baby bottle, something would be wrong. The writer says his readers had been believers long enough to be teaching others, but they were still stuck on the basics. Spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically just because time passes. It happens when you keep learning, asking questions, digging deeper, and putting what you learn into practice.

People who live on milk are still spiritual infants, not familiar with the teaching about righteousness. Solid food belongs to grown-ups, people who have trained themselves through constant practice to tell good from evil.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Training Your Conscience**
>
> The word for trained is related to our word gymnasium. The writer says mature people have exercised their spiritual senses until they can tell right from wrong. That's a skill you build over time. Every time you choose what's right in a small thing, you get better at recognizing it. Every time you read Scripture and apply it, your sense of what's good gets sharper. You're never too young to start training.

KEY VERSE

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 5:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why does it matter that Jesus cried out to God with tears? What does that tell you about honest prayer?
2. Have you ever had a prayer answered in a way you didn't expect? What happened?
3. Would you describe your faith right now as milk or solid food? What would help you grow?
4. How do you train yourself to tell good from evil?

TRY THIS *Choose one question about God or the Bible that you've always wondered about. This week, dig into it. Read about it, ask a pastor or youth leader, and talk it over with a friend. Move from milk toward solid food.*

CHAPTER 6

An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 6

The writer urges his readers to move beyond the basics and go on to maturity. He lists six foundational teachings: turning away from actions that lead to death, faith in God, teaching about cleansing rituals, laying hands on people, the dead being raised, and God's final judgment. These are good things, but the readers shouldn't have to keep laying the foundation over and over. The NIV footnotes offer alternative translations, such as useless rituals and baptisms.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Foundations**
>
> Every building needs a foundation. But nobody builds a foundation and then just stays there. You build on it. The basics of the Christian faith are essential, and you'll keep coming back to them your whole life. But the writer wants his readers to build a whole house on that foundation: deeper understanding, stronger faith, more Christlike character, and a life that helps others grow.

Then comes one of the most debated passages in the whole Bible. Here it is in the NIV: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

The writer compares them to land. Land that soaks up the rain and produces a good crop receives God's blessing. But land that grows nothing but thorns and weeds is useless, close to being cursed, and will finally be burned.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does It Mean?**

Christians have understood this passage in several different ways. Here are four of the main views. Each is held by sincere, Bible-believing Christians.

Loss of salvation: Many Christians in Wesleyan, Methodist, Pentecostal, and some other traditions believe these verses describe genuine believers who truly knew Jesus and then deliberately and finally rejected Him, losing their salvation. The descriptions in verses 4 and 5, they say, sound like real Christians. Catholic and Orthodox Christians also believe that a believer can turn away from grace, though they emphasize that God's mercy remains open to those who repent.

A hypothetical warning: Some believe the writer is describing something that would happen if a true believer could fall away, as a way of showing how serious drifting is, while also believing that God keeps true believers from doing so. Warnings like this, they say, are one of the means God uses to keep His people faithful.

False believers: Many in Reformed and Calvinist traditions believe these verses describe people who were part of the Christian community and experienced many of its blessings, like Judas, but were never truly converted. Their falling away shows that their faith was never genuine. Verse 9, where the writer says he's confident of better things in his readers' case, things that accompany salvation, suggests to them that the people in verses 4 to 6 lacked something.

Loss of reward: Others believe the passage describes genuine believers who stop growing and become spiritually fruitless. They don't lose their salvation, but they lose rewards, usefulness, and the joy of a fruitful life, like the burned field, or like the believer in 1 Corinthians 3:15 who is saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Few Details**

A few details may help. The NIV footnote says verse 6 can also be translated if they fall, rather than and who have fallen. Some scholars also note that the Greek for crucifying and subjecting Him to disgrace describes an ongoing action, and translate the verse to mean that repentance is impossible while they keep on rejecting Him. And all four views agree on something important: the writer is describing a deliberate, public rejection of Jesus after knowing the truth, not ordinary sins, struggles, or doubts. The early church took this passage very seriously. Some Christians in the early centuries debated whether believers who denied Christ under persecution could ever be restored, and the church generally concluded that they could, if they truly repented.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If You're Afraid You've Gone Too Far**

Maybe you've read this passage and felt a wave of fear. Maybe you've done something you're deeply ashamed of, or you went through a time when you walked away from God, or you've had doubts, or you're scared that you've committed an unforgivable sin. If that's you, please hear this. The very fact that you care, that you're worried about your relationship with God, is a sign that your heart is not hardened. The people described in this passage don't want to come back. They've turned their backs on Jesus and don't care. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus restored him (John 21:15–19). God promises that if we confess our sins, He will forgive us (1 John 1:9). Jesus said that whoever comes to Him, He will never drive away (John 6:37). You can come back. Right now. And if this fear keeps coming back, even after you've confessed and trusted God, please talk to a pastor, a youth leader, or a parent. Sometimes anxious, intrusive thoughts attach themselves to faith and need a counselor's help. That's not a sign of weak faith. God is far kinder than your fears.

Immediately after the warning, the writer's tone changes. Dear friends, he says, even though we're talking this way, we're confident of better things for you, the things that go with salvation. God isn't

unjust. He won't forget the work you've done and the love you've shown Him by helping His people, as you still do.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Warn?**
>
> Why would the writer give such a strong warning if he was confident about his readers? Think of a parent who yells, stop, at a child running toward a busy street. The parent isn't saying the child is already dead. The warning is meant to keep the child safe. The writer warns because he loves his readers, and he wants them to keep going. Warnings and encouragement go together.

The writer wants each of them to keep working just as hard until the finish, so that their hope will be fully realized. He doesn't want them to get lazy, but to follow the example of people who inherit God's promises through faith and patience.

Then he gives an example: Abraham. When God made a promise to Abraham, He swore by Himself, since nobody is higher than God. He promised to bless him and give him more descendants than he could count. And Abraham waited patiently, and he got what God had promised.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waiting**
>
> Abraham waited about twenty-five years for the son God promised him (Genesis 12:4; 21:5). Waiting is hard. You might be waiting for a prayer to be answered, for a situation to change, for a friend to come to faith, or for your future to become clearer. Abraham's story shows that God keeps His promises, even when it takes longer than we'd like.

When people make an oath, they swear by someone higher than themselves, and the oath ends any argument. God wanted to make it completely clear that His purpose would never change, so He backed His promise with an oath. So we have two things that can't change, God's promise and God's oath, and it's impossible for God to

lie. That's a huge encouragement for those of us who have run to Him for refuge and grabbed hold of the hope He's given us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Anchor**

The writer calls our hope an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. In the ancient world, the anchor became an early Christian symbol, painted on walls in the catacombs in Rome. An anchor doesn't stop the storm. The wind still blows and the waves still crash. But an anchor keeps the ship from being driven onto the rocks. And notice where this anchor is fixed: not in the sea, but in heaven, behind the curtain, in the very presence of God, where Jesus has gone ahead of us as our forerunner. Your feelings may go up and down. Your circumstances may change. But Jesus doesn't.

KEY VERSE

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Hebrews 6:19 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's one way you'd like to move beyond the basics in your faith?
2. Which of the four views of 6:4–6 makes the most sense to you? Why? What questions do you still have?
3. Why do you think the writer combines strong warnings with strong encouragement?
4. What storms are you facing right now? What does it mean to have an anchor in them?

TRY THIS *Draw an anchor on a card, and on the back, write Hebrews 6:19. Keep it in your wallet, phone case, or locker. When you feel overwhelmed this week, look at it and remember where your hope is fixed.*

CHAPTER 7

The Mysterious King

Hebrews 7

Finally, the writer gets to Melchizedek. He's been hinting about him since chapter 5, and now he explains.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was Melchizedek?**
>
> Melchizedek appears in only three verses of the Old Testament story (Genesis 14:18–20). After Abraham rescued his nephew Lot by defeating a group of invading kings, a man named Melchizedek came out to meet him with bread and wine. He ruled the city of Salem, and he was also a priest who served God Most High. He blessed Abraham, and Abraham handed over a tenth of all he had taken in the battle. Then Melchizedek disappears from the story. About a thousand years later, Psalm 110 mentions him again, when God tells the king, David's Lord, that He will be a priest forever, the same kind of priest Melchizedek was. That's all the Old Testament says. Salem is usually identified with Jerusalem.

The writer notices several details. Melchizedek's name means king of righteousness. Salem sounds like the Hebrew word shalom, peace, so as ruler of Salem he's also a king of peace. And Genesis says nothing about his parents, his family tree, his birth, or his death. In that way, the writer says, he's like the Son of God, a priest who remains forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Without Father or Mother?**

The writer doesn't necessarily mean that Melchizedek literally had no parents or never died. He's pointing out that Genesis doesn't mention them, which is unusual. In a book full of genealogies, Melchizedek appears out of nowhere and vanishes without a trace. For priests in Israel, family tree was everything: you had to prove you were descended from Aaron. Melchizedek's priesthood didn't depend on ancestry at all. Christians have understood him in different ways. Most see him as a real historical king and priest whose story serves as a picture, or type, of Christ. Some have suggested he was an appearance of the Son of God Himself before His birth as a human. Ancient Jewish writers also speculated about him; one of the Dead Sea Scrolls describes a heavenly Melchizedek figure. The writer of Hebrews focuses on what Scripture says, and on what it leaves out.

Think how great Melchizedek must have been, the writer says. Even Abraham, the father of the whole nation, handed him a tenth of what he'd won. Under the law of Moses, the priests from the tribe of Levi collected a tenth from the other Israelites. But Melchizedek wasn't from Levi, and yet Abraham himself paid him a tenth and received his blessing. And everyone knows that the person who gives a blessing is greater than the person who receives it. You could even say, the writer adds, that Levi paid a tenth to Melchizedek through Abraham, since Levi was his great-grandson and wasn't born yet.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Tenth**

Giving a tenth, often called a tithe, was an ancient practice. Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek, Jacob promised a tenth to God (Genesis 28:22), and the law of Moses required a tenth of the harvest to support the Levites and the poor (Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Christians today hold different views about whether the tithe is still required, but almost all agree that generous, regular giving is part of following Jesus (2 Corinthians 9:6–7). Even

> if you don't have much money, you can start the habit of giving some of what you have.

Now the writer makes his main argument. If the priesthood of Levi and Aaron had been able to make people perfect, why would God, in Psalm 110, talk about a different priest, one like Melchizedek? And if the priesthood changes, the law has to change too. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never said anything about priests coming from Judah. So Jesus is a different kind of priest. He didn't become a priest because of a rule about His ancestry, but because of the power of a life that can't be destroyed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **An Indestructible Life**
>
> The Levitical priests served until they died, and then someone else took their place. Jesus died too, but He rose again, and He'll never die again. His priesthood is based on His resurrection life. That's why He can be a priest forever. You'll never have to worry that your high priest will retire, get replaced, or stop caring about you.

The old rules about priests have been set aside because they were weak and couldn't make anything perfect. Now there's a better hope, and through it we can come close to God.

And there's more. The old priests took office without God swearing any oath. But when Jesus was made a priest, God swore an oath and promised never to change His mind. Because of that oath, Jesus guarantees a better covenant.

There were many priests in the old system, because death kept them from continuing. But Jesus lives forever, so His priesthood is permanent. That's why He can save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to pray for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus Prays for You**

Think about this: right now, Jesus is praying for you. The word intercede means to speak up on someone's behalf. Jesus prayed for Peter before Peter denied Him (Luke 22:31–32), and He prayed for all His followers, including us, on the night before He died (John 17:20). Paul says the same thing in Romans 8:34. When you feel like no one is on your side, when you don't know how to pray, when you've messed up again, Jesus is speaking up for you before the Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Save Completely**

The NIV footnote says the phrase translated save completely could also mean save forever. Both are true. Jesus doesn't save you halfway, leaving you to finish the job. And He doesn't save you for a while and then give up. His salvation is complete, and it lasts forever.

This is exactly the high priest we need: holy, without fault, pure, separate from sinners, and raised higher than the heavens. Unlike other high priests, He doesn't need to bring sacrifices every day, for His own sins first and then for everyone else's. He dealt with sin one time, permanently, by offering Himself.

The law put weak human beings in the role of high priest. But God's oath, which came later than the law, put His Son in that role, and the Son has been made perfect for all time.

KEY VERSE

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Hebrews 7:25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you find most interesting about Melchizedek? Why do you think the writer finds him so important?
2. How does it change things to know that Jesus is always praying for you?
3. What's the difference between being saved partly and being saved completely?
4. Why do you think it matters that Jesus offered Himself, rather than an animal?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 14:17–20 and Psalm 110. Then write down three ways Melchizedek points to Jesus. Thank Jesus this week, every day, that He is praying for you.*

CHAPTER 8

A New Covenant

Hebrews 8

The writer sums up his main point. We have this kind of high priest, one who has taken His seat beside God's throne in heaven. He serves in the true sanctuary, the real tabernacle, which God built, not people.

High priests are appointed to bring gifts and sacrifices, so Jesus had to have something to offer too. If He lived on earth, He wouldn't even qualify as a priest, since there are already priests offering gifts under the law. But the place where they serve is only a copy, a shadow of the heavenly reality. That's why God told Moses to build the tabernacle exactly according to the pattern he'd been shown on the mountain (Exodus 25:40).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Copies and Shadows**

A shadow is real, but it's not the thing itself. If you see someone's shadow coming around a corner, you know a person is there, but you can't shake hands with a shadow. The writer says the tabernacle and its sacrifices were real, and God commanded them, but they were shadows of something greater. They showed the shape of what God would do in Jesus. Once the real thing arrives, you don't keep holding on to the shadow.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Present Tense**

Notice that the writer says there are priests who offer gifts, in the present tense. Many scholars take this as evidence that the temple in Jerusalem was

still standing and its sacrifices were still being offered when Hebrews was written, which would mean it was written before AD 70. Others note that the writer is describing the tabernacle as Scripture describes it, and that writers in that period sometimes spoke of the temple in the present tense even after it was destroyed.

The work Jesus has been given is much better than theirs, just as the covenant He brings is better than the old one, because it rests on better promises.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is a Covenant?**

A covenant is a binding agreement or relationship between two parties, with promises and commitments on both sides. In the Old Testament, God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel at Mount Sinai, and David. The covenant at Sinai, given through Moses, included the law, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. It was like a marriage between God and His people: I will be your God, and you will be My people. But the people kept breaking it.

If that first covenant had been perfect, the writer says, there would have been no need for another. But God saw what was wrong with His people, and He promised a new covenant. The NIV footnote mentions another possible reading. Then the writer quotes Jeremiah 31:31–34, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jeremiah's Promise**

Jeremiah lived around 600 BC, as the kingdom of Judah was collapsing. The Babylonians were about to destroy Jerusalem and its temple and carry the people away into exile. It was one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. In the middle of that disaster, God gave Jeremiah a promise. A day is coming when God will establish a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be like the old one, which the people broke, even though God had led them out of Egypt by the hand like a father leading a child.

Then comes the heart of the promise, which the writer quotes in full: "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." In the new covenant, people won't need to tell each other to know the Lord, because everyone will know Him, from the least to the greatest. And God says, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Written on Your Heart**

The old covenant law was written on stone tablets. It told people what to do, but it couldn't give them the desire or power to do it. The new covenant is different. God writes His law on our hearts. Through the Holy Spirit, He changes what we want, so that we love what He loves (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Following God becomes less like obeying a list of outside rules and more like living out who you really are. That doesn't happen overnight. But it's what God is doing in everyone who belongs to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remembered No More**

Does God have a bad memory? No. When God says He'll remember our sins no more, it doesn't mean He forgets they happened. It means He won't hold them against us. He won't bring them up again, use them against us, or punish us for them. They're dealt with, completely. If God has chosen not to remember your forgiven sins, you don't need to keep beating yourself up about them either.

Finally, the writer says that by calling this covenant new, God has shown that the first one is out of date, and anything aging and out of date is about to vanish.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Obsolete?**

Some readers see verse 13 as a hint that the temple was about to be destroyed, and that its sacrifices would soon end, as they did in AD 70. Christians have also discussed how the old and new covenants relate. Most agree that the moral heart of the old covenant, love for God and neighbor,

remains, while the sacrifices and priesthood have been fulfilled in Jesus. And most Christians today emphasize that the new covenant was promised first to Israel, that the earliest believers in Jesus were Jewish, and that God has not forgotten His people Israel (Romans 11:1–2, 28–29). Hebrews gives no basis for disrespect toward Jewish people.

KEY VERSE

This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Hebrews 8:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between a shadow and the real thing? What are some shadows people hold on to instead of Jesus?
2. What does it mean for God's law to be written on your heart? Have you noticed God changing what you want?
3. How does it feel to know that God has chosen to remember your sins no more?
4. Why is it important to read Hebrews 8 in a way that respects Jewish people?

TRY THIS *Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 in your Bible. Then make a list of sins you've confessed but keep feeling guilty about. Pray through the list, thank God that He remembers them no more, and tear it up or delete it.*

CHAPTER 9

Once for All

Hebrews 9

The writer now describes the tabernacle in more detail. The first covenant had rules for worship and an earthly sanctuary. In the first room, called the Holy Place, stood the lampstand and the table holding the sacred bread. Behind the second curtain was the Most Holy Place, with a golden altar for incense and the ark of the covenant, covered in gold. Inside the ark were three things: a golden jar holding manna, the staff of Aaron that had sprouted, and the two stone tablets with the law on them. Above the ark, the cherubim spread their wings over its cover. But, the writer says, there's no time to go into all that now.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was in the Ark?**

Each object in the ark told a story. The manna reminded Israel of the bread God sent from heaven in the wilderness (Exodus 16:32–34). Aaron's staff, which had miraculously sprouted, blossomed, and produced almonds overnight, showed that God had chosen Aaron's family as priests (Numbers 17). And the stone tablets held the Ten Commandments. By Solomon's time, only the tablets remained (1 Kings 8:9). The ark itself disappeared, probably when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BC. No one knows what happened to it, despite what you might have seen in the movies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Puzzle**

Exodus seems to place the altar of incense in the Holy Place, just outside the curtain, rather than in the Most Holy Place (Exodus 30:6). Why does Hebrews connect it with the inner room? Some scholars point out that the Greek word could refer to a golden censer, a container for burning incense, which the high priest carried into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:12–13). Others note that the altar was closely connected with the Most Holy Place, since it stood right in front of the curtain, and 1 Kings 6:22 describes it as belonging to the inner sanctuary. It's a good example of how careful study can help with difficult details.

The priests went into the first room regularly to do their work. But only the high priest went into the inner room, just one day each year, and he always brought blood, offered for his own sins and for sins the people had done without realizing it.

Through this, the writer says, the Holy Spirit was making a point: while the first tabernacle was still in operation, the path into God's inner presence hadn't been opened yet. The gifts and sacrifices couldn't clear the worshiper's conscience. They dealt with food, drink, and ceremonial washings, outward rules that applied until the time when God would set things right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Guilty Conscience**

The writer says the old sacrifices couldn't clean the conscience. They could make someone ceremonially clean, but they couldn't take away the inner sense of guilt and shame. Maybe you know that feeling. You've apologized, you've been punished, everyone has moved on, but you still feel dirty inside. Only Jesus can deal with that. His sacrifice doesn't just cover the outside. It cleans you from the inside out.

But Christ has come as the high priest of good things that have already arrived. He went through a greater, more perfect tabernacle, not built by people, not part of this created world. He

didn't go in with animal blood, but with His own. He entered God's inner presence one time, permanently, and won a redemption that lasts forever. The NIV footnotes offer slightly different readings of these verses.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Once for All**

Once for all is one of the key phrases in Hebrews (7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10). Every year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to do it all over again. Every day, more animals were sacrificed. It never ended. But Jesus offered Himself once, and it was enough, forever. There's nothing left to pay. You don't have to keep earning your way back to God. Jesus has done it once for all.

If animal blood and ashes could make people ceremonially clean on the outside, the writer argues, imagine how much more the blood of Jesus can do. He offered Himself to God, spotless, through the eternal Spirit, and His sacrifice can clean our consciences from the inside so that we can serve the living God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Blood?**

For modern readers, all this talk about blood can seem strange, even disturbing. But in the Bible, blood represents life (Leviticus 17:11). The sacrifices showed that sin is deadly serious; it leads to death. Forgiveness isn't cheap. It costs a life. The writer says that, under the law, almost everything was purified with blood, and adds: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." That's why Jesus' death matters so much. He gave His own life, so that we could have life.

That's why Jesus brings a new covenant and stands between God and us: so that people God has called can receive the eternal inheritance He promised. His death paid the price to free them from the sins they committed under the old covenant.

The writer makes a play on words. As the NIV footnote explains, the Greek word for covenant can also mean a will, like the kind people write to leave an inheritance. A will only takes effect when the person who made it dies. In the same way, the first covenant was put into effect with blood. When Moses read the law to the people, he sprinkled blood on the scroll and the people, and said that this was the blood of the covenant God had commanded them to keep (Exodus 24:8).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Blood of the Covenant**
>
> Jesus used almost the same words at the Last Supper. When He gave His disciples the cup, He said it was His blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). When Christians share communion, also called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, they remember that Jesus' death established the new covenant. Christians from different traditions understand communion in different ways, but all of them connect it to this moment.

The earthly tabernacle and its objects were copies of heavenly things, and they were purified with animal sacrifices. But the heavenly realities needed better sacrifices. Christ didn't enter a man-made sanctuary that was just a copy of the real one. He went into heaven itself, to appear in God's presence for us.

And He didn't go in to offer Himself over and over, like the high priest who went in every year with an animal's blood. Otherwise, Jesus would have had to suffer over and over since the world began. Instead, He has appeared once, at the climax of history, to remove sin by sacrificing Himself.

People die once, and after that comes judgment. In the same way, the writer says, "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of

many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The High Priest Comes Out**

On the Day of Atonement, the people waited outside while the high priest went into the Most Holy Place. They couldn't see what was happening. They just had to wait and hope that the sacrifice had been accepted. When the high priest came back out, alive, it meant God had accepted the sacrifice, and the people could celebrate. The writer says Jesus has gone into God's presence for us, and one day He will come back out, so to speak, to bring His people the full salvation He has won. Until then, we wait with hope.

KEY VERSE

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Hebrews 9:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God gave Israel such detailed instructions about the tabernacle and sacrifices?
2. Have you ever felt guilty even after being forgiven? How does Hebrews 9:14 speak to that?
3. What does once for all mean to you personally?
4. How should knowing that Jesus will return shape the way you live now?

TRY THIS *Look up a diagram of the tabernacle online or in a study Bible. Trace the path the high priest took on the Day of Atonement. Then read Hebrews 10:19–22 and notice what it says you can do now.*

CHAPTER 10

Draw Near

Hebrews 10

The writer sums up his argument about sacrifices. The law was a shadow of the blessings that were on their way, not the blessings themselves. That's why the same sacrifices, repeated every year, could never make the worshipers perfect. If they had worked, the writer asks, wouldn't people have stopped offering them? The worshipers would have been made clean permanently and wouldn't feel guilty anymore. Instead, the sacrifices were a yearly reminder of sin. Animal blood simply can't take sin away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Yearly Reminder**
>
> Imagine having to bring up your worst mistakes every single year at a big public event. That's a little what the Day of Atonement was like. It reminded everyone that sin was still a problem. It pointed to the need for something more. Jesus' sacrifice is different. It doesn't remind God of our sins. It removes them.

Then the writer quotes Psalm 40, putting it in the mouth of Jesus as He came into the world. God didn't really want sacrifices and offerings. Instead, He prepared a body for His Son. And the Son says that He has come to do God's will, as the scroll had written about Him. The NIV footnote says the writer is following the Septuagint version of the psalm, which speaks of a body.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Body You Prepared**

The Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6 says something like you have opened my ears, meaning God had made the psalmist willing to listen and obey. The Greek translation, the Septuagint, speaks instead of a body that God prepared. The writer uses the Greek version, which fits Jesus perfectly. God didn't want endless animal sacrifices. He wanted a life of complete obedience. Jesus came in a human body to offer exactly that, all the way to the cross.

The writer explains that God sets aside the first system to establish the second. And because Jesus did what God wanted, offering His own body, we've been made holy, permanently.

Every day, the writer says, priests stand and do their religious work, offering the same sacrifices again and again, and those sacrifices can never take away sin. But Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins, for all time, and then He sat down at God's right hand. Now He's waiting until His enemies are put under His feet. With that single offering, He has permanently perfected the people He's in the process of making holy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Made Perfect, Being Made Holy**

Look closely at verse 14. Jesus has made us perfect forever: that's done, complete. And we are being made holy: that's ongoing. Both are true. In God's eyes, because of Jesus, you're completely forgiven and accepted. At the same time, God is still working on you, shaping your character to look more like Jesus. Christians sometimes call the first part justification and the second part sanctification. You're not a finished product. But you are completely loved and accepted right now.

The Holy Spirit also confirms this through Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant, which the writer quotes again. God will write His laws on people's hearts, and He'll never again call to mind their sins

and their lawless deeds. And once sins are forgiven, no further sacrifice is needed.

Then the writer turns from teaching to application. Because of Jesus' blood, we can boldly go into God's inner presence. He has opened a new, living path for us through the curtain, which is His body. And He's our great priest, in charge of God's house. So the writer urges three things.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Through the Curtain**
>
> For centuries, a thick curtain kept everyone out of the Most Holy Place except the high priest, once a year. When Jesus died, the Gospels say, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). The writer says the way into God's presence is now open, through Jesus' body, given for us. You don't need a priest, a special place, or a special day to come to God. Through Jesus, the door is open, all the time.

First, let's come close to God with honest hearts and complete confidence, our hearts made clean from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed in clean water. Many interpreters see a reference to baptism here.

Second, let's hold on tightly, without wavering, to the hope we confess, because God, who made the promise, is faithful.

Third, let's think about how we can push each other toward love and doing good. Don't give up meeting together, as some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage one another, even more as the Day of the Lord gets closer.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Spur One Another On**
>
> The word translated spur on is a strong one. It can mean to stir up or provoke. Usually people provoke each other to anger. The writer says to provoke each other to love and good deeds. That takes thought. How can you encourage a friend to be kinder, braver, more generous, or more faithful? It might mean

inviting them to serve with you, praying for them, or simply noticing and praising the good things they do.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Skip**

Some of the first readers had stopped coming to church gatherings, maybe because they were afraid of persecution, or because they were tired or discouraged. The writer says not to do that. You need other believers, and they need you. It's easy to think you can follow Jesus on your own, watching sermons online and reading the Bible by yourself. Those are good things. But they can't replace being with real people: worshiping together, praying together, eating together, and holding each other up. A coal pulled out of a fire goes cold quickly.

Then comes the second severe warning. Here it is: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

The writer reminds them that under the law of Moses, someone who rejected it could be put to death if two or three witnesses testified against them. How much worse punishment does someone deserve who has trampled on the Son of God, treated the blood of the covenant as worthless, and insulted the Spirit of grace? God has said that vengeance belongs to Him and that He will judge His people. The NIV footnotes trace these words to Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 135. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Kind of Sin?**

Christians understand this passage in the same range of ways as 6:4–6: as describing a real believer who loses salvation, a hypothetical warning, people who were never truly converted, or a believer who faces God's discipline and

loss of reward. Look back at chapter 6 for a fuller explanation of each view. But notice what kind of sin the writer is describing. He's not talking about a believer who keeps struggling with a habit, gives in to temptation, or has doubts. The Greek describes an ongoing, deliberate choice, and verse 29 explains what it is: treating Jesus with contempt, rejecting His sacrifice, and insulting the Holy Spirit. If you reject the only sacrifice that can take away sin, the writer says, there's no other sacrifice left. It's like refusing the only lifeboat.

BACKGROUND CHECK **If This Scares You**

If this passage frightens you, read the If You're Afraid You've Gone Too Far box in chapter 6 again. Then notice what the writer says right after this warning: he reminds his readers of their faithfulness and says that they're not the kind of people who turn back. Struggling with sin is not the same as trampling on the Son of God. Worrying that you've gone too far is a sign that you haven't. God's arms are still open.

Then the writer encourages them. Remember the early days, after you first believed, when you stood firm through a hard struggle with suffering. Sometimes you were publicly insulted and persecuted. Sometimes you stood with others who were treated that way. You suffered alongside people in prison, and when your property was taken from you, you accepted it joyfully, because you knew you had something better that would last.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joy When Things Are Taken**

Imagine losing your house, your possessions, and your savings because you follow Jesus, and responding with joy. That's what these believers did. They knew they had something no one could take away. Christians in some parts of the world today face exactly this. Most of us won't. But we can ask ourselves: how tightly am I holding on to my stuff? Would I be willing to lose it for Jesus?

So don't throw away your confidence, the writer says. A rich reward is coming. You need to keep going, so that after you've done God's

will, you'll receive what He promised. He quotes Isaiah and Habakkuk: soon, very soon, the One who is coming will arrive without delay. The person God considers righteous lives by trusting Him, and God is not pleased with anyone who turns back in fear.

The chapter ends with confidence: "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved."

KEY VERSE

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:23–25 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being made perfect forever and being made holy? Why do both matter?
2. What does it mean to you that the way into God's presence is open through Jesus?
3. Why do you think some people give up meeting together? What helps you stay connected?
4. How can you push someone toward love and doing good this week?

TRY THIS *Think of a Christian friend who's been drifting or missing church or youth group. Reach out to them this week, not to guilt them, but to encourage them. Invite them to come with you.*

CHAPTER 11

The Hall of Faith

Hebrews 11

Chapter 10 ended with the words live by faith. Now the writer explains what faith looks like, with a long list of people who lived by it. It's often called the Hall of Faith.

He starts with a definition: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." This is what God's people long ago were commended for.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Faith Is**
>
> Some people think faith means believing something without any reason, or believing something even though you know it isn't true. That's not what Hebrews means. Faith is confidence in God and His promises. It's trusting what He has said, even about things we can't see yet. Everyone lives by some kind of faith: you trust a chair to hold you, a doctor to give the right medicine, a friend to keep a secret. Christian faith is trusting God, based on who He is and what He has done, especially in Jesus. And the examples in this chapter show that real faith always does something.

By faith, the writer says, we know that God created everything by His command, so that the visible world came from what can't be seen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith and Science**
>
> Hebrews 11:3 says that faith helps us understand where the universe came from. That doesn't mean Christians have to ignore science. Many of the

> founders of modern science were Christians who believed that studying creation was a way to understand the God who made it. Christians today hold different views about how and when God created, and those views are worth discussing. But they agree on the main point: the universe isn't an accident. It exists because God spoke.

Then the writer starts naming names. Abel offered God a better sacrifice than his brother Cain, and God approved of him. Even though Abel is dead, his faith still speaks.

Enoch was taken up by God without dying, because he pleased God. And then the writer adds a key principle: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Seek Him**
>
> Notice what verse 6 says. Coming to God involves two beliefs: that He exists, and that He rewards people who seek Him. In other words, God is real, and He's good. He doesn't hide from people who are honestly looking for Him. If you have questions or doubts, keep seeking. Jeremiah 29:13 promises that people who seek God with all their heart will find Him.

Noah was warned by God about things that hadn't happened yet, and in reverent fear he built a huge boat to rescue his family. By doing that, he showed that the world was wrong, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.

Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to a land he'd receive later, even though he didn't know where he was going. He lived in tents in the land God had promised, as if he were a foreigner there, and so did Isaac and Jacob. He was looking forward to a city with foundations, designed and built by God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Knowing Where**

Abraham packed up everything and left, without a map, without a destination, without knowing how it would turn out. He just knew God had told him to go. Maybe you don't know where your life is heading. What college, what job, what city, whom you'll marry, whether things will work out. Faith doesn't mean having all the answers. It means trusting the One who does, and taking the next step He shows you.

Sarah, too, though she was past the age of having children, was able to have a child, because she trusted that God would keep His promise. The NIV footnote offers another way to read the verse, with Abraham as the subject. Either way, from one old man, practically dead, came more descendants than anyone could count, like the stars overhead or the grains of sand on a beach.

All these people died still trusting God. They didn't receive what was promised. They saw it from far away, welcomed it, and admitted that this world wasn't really their home. They were looking for a homeland. If they had been thinking about the country they'd left, they could have gone back. Instead, the writer says, "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one." And so God is proud to be known as their God, and He has a city ready for them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Strangers Here**

Have you ever felt like you don't quite fit in? Like this world isn't really your home? Hebrews says that's how God's people have always felt. We live here, we love the people around us, and we try to make the world better. But our true home is still ahead. That's not an excuse to check out of life. It's a reason for hope. Whatever you're going through here isn't the end of the story.

Then the writer returns to Abraham. When God tested him, Abraham was ready to offer Isaac, the son through whom God had promised to give him descendants. Abraham figured that God had

the power to bring the dead back to life, and in a way, he did get Isaac back from death (Genesis 22).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Hard Story**
>
> The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the hardest in the Bible. Why would God ask a father to sacrifice his son? Remember how the story ends: God stopped Abraham and provided a ram instead, and the Bible elsewhere condemns child sacrifice in the strongest terms (Jeremiah 7:31). Many readers see the story as a test of Abraham's trust, and as a picture of what God Himself would do when He gave His own Son. The writer of Hebrews focuses on Abraham's faith that God could raise the dead.

Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau about their future. Jacob, at the end of his life, gave a blessing to each of Joseph's sons, then bowed in worship, leaning on his staff. Joseph, near the end of his life, spoke about Israel leaving Egypt someday and gave instructions about his bones, so they could be taken to the promised land.

Then comes Moses. His parents hid him as a baby, because they saw he was special, and they weren't afraid of the king's order to kill Hebrew boys. When Moses grew up, he refused to be known as a member of Pharaoh's family. He chose to suffer with God's people rather than enjoy sin's short-lived pleasures. He considered disgrace for the sake of the Messiah worth more than all the wealth of Egypt, because he had his eyes on the reward ahead. He left Egypt without fear of the king's anger. He kept going because he saw the invisible God. He kept the Passover, so that the destroyer would not touch Israel's firstborn.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Choosing Hard Things**
>
> Moses could have had it all: wealth, power, comfort, and status as a member of the royal family. He gave it up to stand with an enslaved people. That's a picture of faith that costs something. Sometimes following Jesus means

choosing what's hard over what's easy, what's right over what's popular, what lasts over what feels good right now. Moses made that choice because he could see something others couldn't.

The people crossed the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but the Egyptians drowned trying to follow. Jericho's walls collapsed after a week of the army marching around the city. And Rahab, a prostitute, wasn't killed with the disobedient, because she welcomed the Israelite spies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rahab**

Rahab is one of the most surprising people in the Hall of Faith. She wasn't an Israelite. She was a Canaanite from Jericho, and she worked as a prostitute. But she believed that Israel's God was the true God, and she risked her life to protect His people (Joshua 2). She later became an ancestor of King David and of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). The Hall of Faith isn't a list of perfect people. It's a list of people who trusted God. That means there's room for you.

What more can I say? the writer asks. He doesn't have time to talk about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, did what was right, received God's promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped the sword, found strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and drove back foreign armies. Women received their dead back, raised to life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Flawed Heroes**

If you know their stories, some of these names might surprise you. Gideon was fearful and asked God for sign after sign. Barak refused to go into battle without Deborah. Samson was impulsive and kept making terrible choices. Jephthah made a rash vow with tragic results. David committed adultery and arranged a murder. The writer doesn't hold them up as perfect role models. Their faith was real, even though they were deeply flawed. God works through imperfect people, and He's honest about their failures.

But not everyone was rescued. Some were tortured and refused to be released, because they wanted a better resurrection. Some were mocked and whipped, chained and imprisoned. Some were stoned, sawed in two, and killed with the sword. They wandered around in sheepskins and goatskins, poor, persecuted, and mistreated, living in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. The world wasn't worthy of them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith That Isn't Rescued**
>
> This part of the list is important. Faith doesn't always lead to victory, healing, or escape. Sometimes faithful people suffer and die. An old Jewish tradition says that the prophet Isaiah was sawed in two by the wicked king Manasseh. Many Christians in the early church were tortured and killed. Faith isn't a guarantee that life will go well. It's trust that God is good and will keep His promises, even when we don't see the answer in this life. Some of the people with the greatest faith in this chapter never saw their prayers answered the way they hoped.

All these people were commended for their faith, the writer says, but none of them received what was promised. God had planned something better, so that they would be made perfect only together with us.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Together with Us**
>
> The last verse is beautiful. The heroes of faith are waiting for us. God's plan includes them and us, the whole family of faith across history. They won't receive the full promise without us, and we won't receive it without them. You're part of the same story as Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and David. And the story isn't finished yet. You're writing your own chapter right now.

KEY VERSE

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How would you explain faith to a friend who thinks it means believing something without reason?
2. Which person in the Hall of Faith do you relate to most? Why?
3. Why do you think the writer included flawed people like Samson and Rahab?
4. What does it mean to have faith even when God doesn't rescue you from a hard situation?

TRY THIS *Write your own entry for the Hall of Faith: By faith, [your name]... Write about one way you're trusting God right now, or one step of faith you want to take. Then take that step this week.*

CHAPTER 12

Run the Race

Hebrews 12

After the Hall of Faith, the writer turns to his readers. Picture a stadium. The heroes of chapter 11 fill the stands all around us, a huge crowd of witnesses. So let's get rid of everything that slows us down, especially the sin that trips us up so easily, and let's run, and keep running, the race God has set in front of us. And as we run, let's keep our eyes on Jesus, who started our faith and will bring it to completion. Because of the joy ahead of Him, He endured the cross, ignoring its shame, and now He's seated beside God's throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crowd in the Stands**

Who are the witnesses? Some readers picture the heroes of faith in heaven watching us run, like fans cheering in a stadium. Others think the writer means they're witnesses in the sense of people who testify: their lives bear witness to God's faithfulness, showing us that the race can be finished. Either way, you're not running alone. Countless believers have run this race before you, through hardships far worse than yours, and they made it. Their stories shout: keep going.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Run Light**

No runner competes wearing a heavy backpack, jeans, and boots. They strip down to what's essential. The writer mentions two kinds of things to throw off. One is sin, which tangles your feet. The other is everything that hinders, which might not be sinful at all, but slows you down: too much screen time,

an unhealthy relationship, a habit that drains your energy, an obsession with what other people think. What's weighing you down? What would it take to drop it?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eyes on Jesus**

Runners who keep looking back or sideways lose time, and sometimes trip. The writer says to fix your eyes on Jesus. He calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith: the one who blazed the trail, and the one who finishes what He starts in you. Notice what kept Jesus going through the cross: the joy set before Him. Part of that joy was you. When the race gets hard, look at Him. He's already crossed the finish line, and He's waiting for you there.

Think about Jesus, the writer says, who endured so much hostility from sinners, so that you won't get tired and give up. In your fight against sin, you haven't yet had to resist to the point of bleeding.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Not Yet**

The writer's readers had faced insults, prison, and the loss of their property, but none of them had been killed for their faith, at least not yet. Jesus had. The writer isn't minimizing their suffering. He's putting it in perspective. Whatever hardship you face for following Jesus, He has been through worse, and He knows how to help you through it.

Then the writer talks about hardship as discipline. He quotes Proverbs 3: don't take the Lord's discipline lightly, and don't lose heart when He corrects you, because God trains and corrects those He loves, like a father with a son he delights in.

The writer says to treat hard times as training. It's a sign that God is dealing with you as His own kids. What child isn't disciplined by a parent? If you were never disciplined, it would mean you didn't really belong to the family. Our human parents disciplined us for a short time as they thought best, and we respected them. How much

more should we accept the discipline of our heavenly Father, and live? God trains us for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Discipline Isn't Abuse**
>
> It's important to understand what the writer means and doesn't mean. Discipline means training: the coach who makes you run extra laps, the teacher who makes you redo an assignment, the parent who sets limits because they love you. The writer says God uses hard things in our lives to train and strengthen us. That doesn't mean that every bad thing that happens to you is a punishment from God, or that God causes evil. And it never means that abuse is okay. If an adult is hurting you, physically, emotionally, or sexually, and calling it discipline, that's wrong. It's not God's will, and it's not your fault. Tell a trusted adult, and keep telling until someone helps.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Training Hurts**
>
> The writer is honest. No discipline feels good at the time. It hurts. But later it produces a harvest of right living and peace in people who let it train them. Every athlete knows this. The workouts that make you stronger are the ones that hurt. God isn't trying to make you miserable. He's making you strong.

So, the writer says, strengthen your tired arms and wobbly knees. Make straight paths for your feet, quoting Proverbs 4:26, so that those who are limping won't be injured further, but healed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Straight Paths for Others**
>
> Notice why the writer wants straight paths: for the sake of those who are limping. Your choices affect other people, especially those who are weaker or struggling. When you live with integrity, you make it easier for others to follow Jesus too. When you're careless, you can make them stumble.

Work hard at living at peace with everyone, and at being holy, because nobody will see the Lord without holiness. Make sure no one misses out on God's grace, and that no root of bitterness sprouts, causing trouble and poisoning many people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bitter Roots**

Bitterness starts small, like a seed. Someone hurts you, and instead of dealing with it, you replay it in your mind again and again. Over time, the root grows. It shows up in sarcasm, gossip, suspicion, and anger. And it doesn't just hurt you; it spreads. Bitter people often make others bitter too. The answer isn't pretending you weren't hurt. It's bringing the hurt to God, forgiving, and, when it's safe, working things out.

Make sure no one is sexually immoral, the writer adds, or godless like Esau, who traded away his rights as the oldest son for a single meal (Genesis 25:29–34). Later, when he wanted the blessing, he was turned down. He couldn't undo what he'd done, even though he begged with tears.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Esau's Bowl of Stew**

Esau came home starving and traded his inheritance, which was worth a fortune, for a bowl of stew. It seems ridiculous. But people do it all the time: trading something precious for something that satisfies right now. Trading purity for a moment of pleasure. Trading a friendship for popularity. Trading your integrity for a better grade. Esau's story is a warning about short-term thinking. Some interpreters note that Esau's tears were about losing the blessing, not about turning from his sin, and that the passage is not saying God refuses people who truly repent.

Then the writer paints a contrast between two mountains. When Israel came to Mount Sinai to receive the law, the mountain was burning with fire, wrapped in darkness and storm. There was a trumpet blast and a voice so terrifying that the people begged not to hear any more. Even an animal that touched the mountain had to be killed. Even Moses said he was shaking with fear (Exodus 19–20; Deuteronomy 9:19).

But you have come to a different mountain, the writer says: Mount Zion, the living God's city, Jerusalem in heaven. You've come to

countless angels in a joyful celebration, to the gathering of God's firstborn children, whose names are recorded in heaven. You've come to God, who judges everyone, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, and to Jesus, who brings the new covenant, and to His sprinkled blood, which speaks a better word than Abel's.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Better Word Than Abel's**
>
> When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God said that Abel's blood cried out from the ground (Genesis 4:10). It cried out for justice. Jesus' blood speaks a better word. It cries out for mercy and forgiveness. Every time you come to worship, the writer says, you're joining a celebration in heaven, with angels and believers from every age, and you're standing on the ground of Jesus' blood, which says: forgiven.

So don't refuse the One who is speaking, the writer warns. If people didn't escape when they refused God's warning on earth, we certainly won't escape if we turn away from the One whose warning comes from heaven. At Sinai, God's voice shook the earth. Now He promises to shake the earth and the heavens too, quoting Haggai 2:6. That means everything that can be shaken will be removed, so that what can't be shaken will remain.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Unshakable**
>
> Everything around you can be shaken: your health, your friendships, your family's finances, your country, your plans, your feelings. That can be scary. But the writer says we're receiving a kingdom that can never be shaken. When everything else falls apart, God's kingdom stands. That's why we can be thankful, and worship God with reverence and awe. As the writer reminds us, quoting Deuteronomy 4:24, God is a consuming fire. He isn't tame. But He's good.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1–2 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's slowing you down in your race right now? What would it take to throw it off?
2. How can you tell the difference between God's loving discipline and something that is simply wrong or harmful?
3. Is there a bitter root growing in your life? What would it take to pull it up?
4. What in your life feels shaky right now? How does knowing God's kingdom can't be shaken help?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing that hinders you and one sin that easily entangles you. Make a specific plan to throw each one off this week, and tell a trusted friend or mentor so they can run alongside you.*

CHAPTER 13

The Same Forever

Hebrews 13

The last chapter is full of practical instructions for everyday life. The writer packs a lot into a few verses.

Keep loving each other like family. Don't forget to welcome strangers, because some people have welcomed angels without realizing it, like Abraham did (Genesis 18). Remember people in prison as though you were there with them, and people who are being mistreated as though you were the one suffering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Welcome Strangers**

In the ancient world, travelers depended on hospitality, and inns were often dangerous or disreputable. Christians became known for welcoming travelers, missionaries, and people in need into their homes. Today, hospitality might look like inviting the new kid to sit with you at lunch, welcoming a visitor at church, being kind to a refugee family in your community, or opening your home to a friend who needs a place to stay. You never know whom you might be welcoming.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Remember the Prisoners**

In the first century, prisoners depended on friends and family for food and clothing. Visiting them could be risky, because it identified you with them. The writer says to remember them as if you were in chains too. Today, many Christians around the world are imprisoned for their faith, and many other people in prisons need friendship and hope. Some churches run prison

ministries. You can pray for persecuted believers, write letters through organizations that support them, and remember that Jesus said visiting prisoners is like visiting Him (Matthew 25:36).

Everyone should honor marriage and keep sex within marriage, because God will judge those who commit adultery and sexual immorality.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sex and Marriage**

The writer's words are clear: God designed sex for marriage, and He takes sexual faithfulness seriously. That's a countercultural message in a world that often treats sex casually. But notice that the writer says marriage should be honored. God isn't against sex; He created it, and He thinks it's good. He wants to protect it, and you. If you've already made mistakes in this area, remember everything Hebrews has said about grace and forgiveness. God offers you a fresh start. And if anyone has ever pressured or forced you into something sexual, that's not your sin. Tell a trusted adult.

Don't let love of money control your life. Be satisfied with what you have, since God has promised that He will never leave you or abandon you. That's a quotation from Deuteronomy 31:6. So we can confidently say, with Psalm 118, that the Lord is our helper, so we won't be afraid. What can mere people do to us?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Never Leave You**

Why connect contentment with God's promise never to leave? Because we often chase money and possessions out of fear: fear of not having enough, fear of being left out, fear of the future. The writer says that if God is with you, you already have what you need most. In Greek, the promise in verse 5 uses several negatives for emphasis, something like: I will never, no never, leave you; I will never, ever abandon you. Whatever happens, He'll be there.

Remember your leaders, the writer says, who taught you God's word. Think about how their lives turned out, and imitate their faith.

Then comes one of the best-known verses in Hebrews, and the Key Verse for this chapter: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Same**
>
> Everything changes. Friends move away. Trends come and go. Your body changes. Your feelings change from hour to hour. Even leaders you respect, like the ones mentioned in verse 7, eventually die. But Jesus doesn't change. The Jesus who healed the sick, welcomed sinners, and died for the world is the same Jesus who knows you today. His love for you won't change tomorrow. You can count on Him.

Don't get carried away by all sorts of strange teachings, the writer says. Grace is what strengthens our hearts, not ceremonial food rules, which don't help the people who follow them.

The writer says that we have an altar that the priests who serve at the tabernacle aren't allowed to eat from. On the Day of Atonement, the bodies of the animals sacrificed for sin were burned outside the camp. In the same way, Jesus suffered outside the city gate of Jerusalem, so that His own blood would make His people holy. So let's go out to Him, outside the camp, and share the shame He experienced. This world isn't our permanent city. We're looking forward to the city that's coming.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Outside the Camp**
>
> Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem's walls, in a place for criminals and outcasts. The writer invites his readers to go to Him there. For the first readers, that may have meant leaving behind the safety and respect of their old community and accepting the disgrace of being associated with a

crucified man. For you, it might mean being willing to be unpopular, misunderstood, or left out because you follow Jesus. It's also a reminder that Jesus is found with outsiders. If you want to find Him, look among the people others reject.

Through Jesus, the writer says, let's always offer God a sacrifice of praise, words that openly honor His name. And don't forget to do good and share with others, because God is pleased with those kinds of sacrifices.

BACKGROUND CHECK **New Sacrifices**

The animal sacrifices are over. Jesus offered the final sacrifice for sin. But the writer says there are still sacrifices Christians can offer: praise, and doing good, and sharing. These aren't ways of paying for sin. They're ways of saying thank you. Singing, praying, thanking God out loud, helping someone in need, and sharing what you have are all ways of worshiping.

Trust your leaders and follow their direction, because they watch over you, knowing they'll have to give an account to God. Let them do their work with joy, not with groaning, because that wouldn't help you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following Leaders**

The writer asks his readers to trust and support their church leaders, who care for their souls and will answer to God for how they lead. Good leaders deserve respect and cooperation. Making their job miserable hurts everyone. At the same time, the rest of the Bible makes clear that no leader is above God's word, and that leaders who abuse their position must be held accountable. Following leaders never means doing something God forbids or keeping quiet about abuse. Healthy churches have leaders who serve, and members who support them.

Then the writer asks for prayer. He's confident that his conscience is clear, and his goal is to live honorably in everything. He

especially asks them to pray that he'll be able to come back to them soon.

Then comes a magnificent blessing, which also closes this book. The writer prays that the God of peace, who raised Jesus, the great Shepherd, from the dead by the blood of an everlasting covenant, will equip you with everything good to do His will, and work in us what pleases Him, through Jesus, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Great Shepherd**

This is the only place in Hebrews where the writer explicitly mentions Jesus' resurrection, though he's assumed it all along, since Jesus is seated at God's right hand. And he calls Jesus the great Shepherd. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). The God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who will equip you for everything He asks you to do. You don't have to do it in your own strength.

Finally, the writer urges them to put up with his word of exhortation, adding that he has written only briefly. He shares news that Timothy has been released, presumably from prison, and that if Timothy comes soon, they'll visit together. He sends greetings to all their leaders and all God's people, and passes on greetings from those from Italy. And he closes with a blessing of grace for them all.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Short Letter?**

Hebrews takes about an hour to read aloud. The writer calls it brief. Maybe he meant that he could have said much more, which is probably true, given how many times he says he doesn't have time to explain everything (5:11; 9:5; 11:32). The mention of Timothy is one of the few personal details in the letter, and it's one reason some people connected the letter with Paul. It shows that the writer was part of the same network of early Christian leaders.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Quit**

That's the message of Hebrews in two words. Jesus is better than anything else you could turn to. He's greater than angels, greater than Moses, the perfect high priest, the final sacrifice, the guarantee of a better covenant. He understands you. He prays for you. He has opened the way to God. So hold on. Draw near. Encourage each other. Run your race with your eyes on Him. And don't quit.

KEY VERSE

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of the practical instructions in this chapter is hardest for you to live out? Why?
2. What would it look like for you to go to Jesus outside the camp, to people others reject?
3. How does knowing that Jesus never changes help you when everything else does?
4. Looking back over all of Hebrews, what's one thing you want to remember?

TRY THIS *Pick one practical instruction from this chapter and do it this week: welcome a stranger, pray for a persecuted Christian, write a thank-you note to a leader, or give something to someone in need.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read the whole sermon called Hebrews. Its message is that Jesus is better than anything else we could trust, because He's the Son of God who became one of us, the high priest who offered Himself as the final sacrifice for sin.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God has spoken.

God made you, and He wants you to know Him. He has spoken most clearly through His Son, Jesus.

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from a holy God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus is the final sacrifice.

Jesus, our high priest, offered Himself on the cross for our sins, once and for all, and rose again. The way into God's presence is open.

> *But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.* **Hebrews 9:26 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then run your race with your eyes fixed on Him.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can come to God with confidence, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, my high priest, offered Himself once for all for my sins. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and*

I want to follow Him as my King. Help me fix my eyes on Him and keep running. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Hebrews straight through, maybe a chapter a day. Then read James, the next letter in the New Testament, about faith that works.

Find your people. Don't give up meeting together, Hebrews says. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Come to Him with confidence. Jesus understands what you're going through, and He's praying for you.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Hebrews is right, God has spoken to us through His Son, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing

his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him,
through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:20–21 (NIV)