

# *The Scope, Content, Judgment, and Goal of the Gospel in the Epistle to the Hebrews*

by John Pester

**T**he Epistle to the Hebrews is a hard book. It is hard in its content, structure, and style (2 Pet. 3:15-16), and it is hard in its revelation of the consequences of ignoring the voice of the Lord when He speaks to believers who are wandering in the wilderness of their untransformed soul (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7—4:13; 5:11—6:20; 10:19-39; 12:1-29). It is hard, but it is also good news; it is the gospel (4:2, 6). In the operation of the divine economy in the age of grace, the gospel is presented through speaking, and it is received through hearing (Rom. 10:14). Reflecting this divine arrangement, Hebrews is an extended speaking of the gospel of the Lord's full salvation to redeemed but wavering believers, and it is an extended exhortation to pursue the promise of the righteous reward that awaits those who are diligent to enter into the rest and enjoyment of God's corporate dwelling place on earth in this age (13:22; 4:1, 11; 3:6).

The content of the speaking and the exhortation in Hebrews is the gospel. Just as Paul presents a broad view of the gospel in the Epistle to the Romans, revealing God's desire to make sinners sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as the local churches, he presents an equally broad view of the gospel in Hebrews,<sup>1</sup> revealing God's desire to bring many sons into glory to be His corporate dwelling place and enlarged expression in this age and in the coming millennial kingdom.<sup>2</sup> The gospel in Romans is a proclamation of Jesus Christ,

according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has now been manifested, and through the prophetic writings, according to the command of the eternal God, has been made known to all the Gentiles for the obedience of faith. (16:25-26)

The gospel in Hebrews is also a proclamation of the Son

who, in the last of these days, has been manifested as the fulfillment of the speaking of the prophets to the fathers (1:1-2). In both Romans and Hebrews, the gospel is presented to believers, not unbelievers,<sup>3</sup> in order to build upon the rudiments of the oracles of God so that they may be established as mature sons, who are entitled to enjoy the promise of God's salvation in glory as fully qualified heirs of God (5:12; 6:1, 17; Rom. 1:11; 8:17).

**A**s believers, we need to recover an understanding of the scope, content, judgment, and goal of the gospel, which was promised by God through His prophets in the holy Scriptures (1:2). In regard to its scope, the gospel is God's speaking to His people (vv. 7-8, 15; Heb. 2:17; 4:9; 8:10; 10:30; 11:25), to those who are inheriting the promises through faith (6:12); in regard to its content, the gospel reveals and imparts the attainments and obtainments of Christ in His person and work in incarnation and resurrection (5:7-10; Rom. 1:3-4); in regard to its judgment, the gospel requires a righteous appraisal of our response to God's speaking, an appraisal that results in either reward or punishment; in regard to its goal, the gospel fulfills the eternal will of God, the command of the eternal God (16:26).<sup>4</sup>

The redemption of individual, sinful human beings is not the ultimate goal of the will of God; instead, the will of God is focused on the corporate perfection of redeemed humanity to produce a mutual dwelling place for God in humanity and for humanity in God.<sup>5</sup> The extent to which we, as believers, participate in this perfecting process in this age will determine the extent to which we are rewarded or punished in the next age. This corporate perfection is based upon Christ's work in the days of His flesh, during which He authored so great a salvation (Heb. 2:10). It also is based upon His work in resurrection as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (v. 17;

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3:1; 4:14; 5:10), through which He is now perfecting His great salvation in many sons. The gospel, ultimately, concerns the work of the glorified God-man, Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, to lead many sons into a corporate expression of His glory (2:10; 12:2).

Consequently, in Hebrews, the good news of the gospel is more than a call for fallen sinners to repent, to believe in Christ's sacrificial redemption on the cross, and to receive God's eternal forgiveness. Instead, the gospel in Hebrews is a call for redeemed believers to not waver and wander in the wilderness of an untransformed soul but rather to enter into the Holy of Holies, their regenerated spirit mingled with the Spirit of God, to receive grace and touch the divine authority of the kingdom life as a preparation and a foretaste for the reward of ruling and reigning with Christ in the coming inhabited earth (1:6), the millennial kingdom.

### The Scope of the Gospel in Hebrews

The scope of the gospel in Hebrews extends beyond the redemption and reconciliation of unbelievers to focus on the ongoing inward, organic operation of the Son's indestructible life within reconciled believers (Rom. 5:10; Heb. 10:14; 7:16). The gospel is more than a call for unbelievers to repent; it is God's call for believers to fully participate in the economy of His salvation, which leads many sons into glory (2:10). The relationship between the gospel and the operation of God's economy in the believers is highlighted in Hebrews through the typological references to the children of Israel hearing the gospel in the wilderness (4:2, 6). "The children of Israel, as people of God, are a type of us, the New Testament believers (1 Cor. 9:24—10:11). Their entire history is a prefigure of the church" (Recovery Version, Heb. 3:6, note 1). In prefigure, the experiences of the children of Israel point to the experiences of the church, the believers. Paul underscores this relationship in his admonition to the church in Corinth to not follow the example of those who were strewn along in the wilderness because of the indulgence of the flesh (1 Cor. 10:5-11). In verse 11 he states, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the ages have come." "*The ends of the ages* refers to the fact that all the past ages were consummated at the beginning of the New Testament age" (Recovery Version, note 2), making this age the equivalent of "the last of these days" in Hebrews 1:2. Thus, the ends of the ages have come to the believers in the last of these days. The ending of this last age, however, depends upon the believers hearing and receiving the contents of the gospel of this great salvation, which have been made available through Christ's human living, death, resurrection, and ascension, and which are now being imparted into the believers through

the ministry of Christ as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

In the last of these days, there is a need for admonitions, drawn from the history of the children of Israel, to not lust after evil things, like the Corinthians, but rather to overcome the deceitfulness of sin in our body, which is being corrupted according to the lusts of the deceit (1 Cor. 10:6; Heb. 3:13; Eph. 4:22). And there is a need for admonitions to not walk as the Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind, like the Hebrew believers, but rather to be renewed in the spirit of our mind (vv. 17, 23). By giving heed to the admonitions, which are exemplified through the history of the children of Israel, it is possible for believers to gain their soul in this age and in the coming one, rather than lose it in the coming age (Heb. 10:39; Matt. 16:25; Mark 8:35).

The history of the children of Israel in the wilderness serves as an organizing type in Hebrews; that is, it defines the scope of the Son's speaking and the context of the apostle's exhortation. In this type, both the children of Israel and their wandering in the wilderness have typological significance. The children of Israel signify the believers, and their wandering in the wilderness signifies a living that is under the influence and control of the natural human life, which is animated by entangling sin and which is expressed through an untransformed soul lacking in experiential sanctification (Heb. 12:1, 4; 10:14).

### The Gospel Being Spoken to Believers

In the second warning section (3:7—4:13), the gospel is explicitly mentioned in the context of the children of Israel's experience in the wilderness. Hebrews 4:2 and 6 indicate that God's speaking in the Son is a speaking of the gospel to believers.

The intention of God's speaking in this book was that the Jews who believed in the Lord but still lingered in Judaism would leave the law and cross over to grace (4:16; 7:18-19; 12:28; 13:9), that they would leave the old covenant and cross over to the new covenant (8:6-7, 13), and that they would leave the ritualistic service of the Old Testament and cross over to the spiritual reality of the New Testament (8:5; 9:9-14); that is, that they would leave Judaism and cross over to the church (13:13; 10:25), that they would leave the earthly things and cross over to the heavenly things (12:18-24), that they would leave the outer court, where the altar is, and cross over to the Holiest of all, where God is (13:9-10; 10:19-20), that they would leave the soul and cross over to the spirit (4:12), and that they would leave the beginning of truth and life and cross over to the maturity of life in the truth (5:11—6:1). Not only the Jews who believed in the Lord but all who contact God by faith should be such river

crossers. This is the purpose of God's speaking in this book. (Recovery Version, 1:1, note 2)

The speaking of the Son and the exhortation of Paul in Hebrews are focused on believers who are wandering in the wilderness, not on unbelievers who are in need of redemption in Egypt. To be in the wilderness is to be redeemed, because the exodus of the children of Israel into the wilderness was dependent upon their typological participation in the passing over of God in Egypt, based on the covering blood of the slain lamb. In Hebrews the children of Israel are a type of genuine believers, because by faith they were redeemed by the "pouring out of the blood" of the Lamb, and by faith they "passed through the Red Sea," the waters of baptism (11:28-29). The entire framework of Hebrews rests upon the type of the children of Israel, who wandered in the wilderness rather than entering into the good land of God's promise. In *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, Randall Gleason writes,

Because of their typological relationship to the Exodus generation, I consider those warned in Hebrews to be genuine believers in danger of forfeiting covenant blessings and of undergoing the physical discipline of God while escaping final judgment. The basis for this understanding is that despite their unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea, the Exodus generation was a redeemed people. (344-345)<sup>6</sup>

Although the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness is the explicit context of the second warning, it is also the implicit context of the other warning sections, if not the entire Epistle. Gleason develops "the writer's use of the Exodus generation as a type of the Christian community" (342), noting,

In each warning, examples from the Exodus are used to drive home the danger of the present threat to his readers. Because of the author's explicit reference to the rebellion of the Exodus generation in Hebrews 3-4, many have recognized the vital role of the events of Kadesh-Barnea in deciphering the meaning of the warnings in Hebrews 3:12-14. However, few commentaries have recognized the allusions to the events of the Exodus in the other warning passages. (342)

Gleason elaborates on this point by indicating that there are strong "echoes of the experiences of the wilderness generation" in the section containing the third warning, 5:11—6:20, notably in 6:4, where he suggests "'enlightened' = pillar of fire; 'tasted of the heavenly gift' = manna; 'partakers of the Holy Spirit' = the Spirit coming upon the seventy elders" (343). Witness Lee also draws a parallel between the phrase *crucifying again for themselves the Son of God and putting Him to open shame in*

verse 6 and Moses' wilderness experience of striking the rock a second time, which

broke the basic principle of God's redemption. Christ, typified by the rock, should have been smitten just once. This was the reason in Numbers 20:8 the Lord charged Moses to speak to the rock, not to smite it. The rock had already been smitten in Exodus 17. Nevertheless, Moses failed by smiting the rock a second time. Christians throughout the centuries have done the same thing, in effect crucifying Christ again. (*Life-study* 480-481)

Gleason also makes an insightful observation in regard to the references to the tabernacle in the section in Hebrews that speaks of the superiority of the new covenant, 8:1—10:18, saying, "References to the 'tabernacle' (σκηνή) rather than the temple as the place of service for the Levitical priesthood throughout Hebrews 8 and 9 also point back to the conditions in the wilderness" (344). The plan for the tabernacle was given in the wilderness (8:5), and the construction of the tabernacle

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occurred in the wilderness (9:2-3, 6), indicating that even though we, as believers, must deal with the fallen elements of our soul-life in this age, there is a place of refuge and supply in our regenerated human spirit (8:2; 9:9, 11). In type, it is possible for believers to sojourn in God's tent in the wilderness in order to dwell in His holy mountain in the good land (Psa. 15:1).

Even in chapter 11, which is not devoted to warnings,

the author confirms the redeemed status of the Exodus generation. With the events of Exodus 14:30-31 clearly in mind, he commends them for their exemplary faith, declaring "By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land" (v. 29 NASB). Hence, like Noah, Abraham, and Moses, the author includes the Exodus generation among those who had "gained approval through their faith" (v. 39 NASB). (Gleason 346)

All the warnings in Hebrews are the Son's speaking through the Holy Spirit to genuine believers, as typified

by the Israelites, who were redeemed while they were in Egypt. Verses 7 and 8 of chapter 3 say, “Therefore, even as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the provocation, in the day of trial in the wilderness.’” The post-redemptive aspect of the wilderness experience is confirmed in verses 15 and 16, which say, “‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the provocation.’ For who provoked Him when they heard? Indeed was it not all who came out of Egypt by Moses?”

The word spoken in the wilderness to the children of Israel is identified in Hebrews 4:2 and 6 as the gospel, both to them and to us. Verse 2 says, “Indeed we have had the good news announced to us, even as they also; but the word heard did not profit them, not being mixed together with faith in those who heard.” The good news that was announced to the children of Israel was the report of the good land given by those who returned from spying out the land. This report confirmed the truth of the Lord’s speaking to Moses and His speaking through Moses to the elders of Israel that He would bring them to “a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exo. 3:8; cf. vv. 16-17). Jehovah’s assurance that He would bring the children of Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey was spoken while they were in Egypt, showing that the emphasis of the gospel relates to the entrance of redeemed believers into the good land, not the exiting of redeemed believers from Egypt. Although the gospel speaks of the need for redemption, it is ultimately a report concerning the land of God’s promise.

In *Govett on Hebrews* Robert Govett, relying on J. N. Darby’s New Translation, comments on Hebrews 4:2, saying, “‘The word of the report’ refers to the report brought to Israel by the twelve spies concerning the land of promise” (96). All the promises of God are related to Christ and fulfilled in Christ (Acts 13:23; Gal. 3:14). As such, the good land, the land of promise (Heb. 11:9), typifies the all-inclusive Christ as both God’s rest and His people’s supply.<sup>7</sup> Although the children of Israel were given a good report of a land flowing with milk and honey and filled with abundant fruit (Num. 13:26-27), they were also given an evil report that the inhabitants of the land lived in fortified cities and were men of great size and strength (vv. 28, 32).

According to Hebrews 4:6, this report produced disobedience to the point that “those who formerly had the good news announced to them did not enter.” The report concerning men of great size and strength, who lived in fortified cities, spread like gangrene within the hearts of the children of Israel, and rather than entering into the good land to overthrow these strongholds, their faith was overthrown (2 Tim. 2:17-18). The fortified cities in the

good land typify the reasonings and high things that rise up against the knowledge of God,<sup>8</sup> which need to be taken captive to the obedience of Christ through weapons of warfare that are powerful before God for the overthrowing of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-5).<sup>9</sup> The high things that rise up against the knowledge of God reflect the haughty reasonings and thoughts that emanate from a reprobate mentality, which is a principal characteristic of an untransformed soul (Recovery Version, v. 5, notes 1 and 2).

### *The Gospel Being Spoken to Wandering Believers*

A reprobate mentality was the defining characteristic of the children of Israel in their wanderings in the wilderness. When the children of Israel heard the words of the evil report, “the whole assembly lifted up their voice and cried,” weeping through the night (Num. 14:1). Furthermore, they “murmured against Moses and against Aaron,” and accused Jehovah not only of indifference but even of malice (vv. 2-3). They were held captive by the fear of death, unable to move forward, and thought only of returning to Egypt, of shrinking back to ruin (vv. 4, 9; Heb. 2:15; 10:39). A reprobate mentality is also an animating characteristic of believers who are wandering in the wilderness of their untransformed soul, walking as the Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind (Eph. 4:17). In experience, such believers are “darkened in their understanding” and “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance which is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (v. 18). While unbelievers walk according to the impulses of an untransformed soul because of the hardness of their heart, many believers also wander in the wilderness of an untransformed soul because they have hardened their heart to the voice of the Lord (Heb. 3:15).<sup>10</sup> Thus, they are unable to progress toward God’s goal of rest, and they are unwittingly waiting for their carcasses to righteously fall in the wilderness, short of the promised rest.

When we hear the good news of God’s great salvation, the word will not profit us if our heart is hardened to the voice of the Lord, and there will be a shrinking back to ruin, which will result in losing our soul rather than gaining it (10:39). In a footnote to verse 39, Witness Lee says,

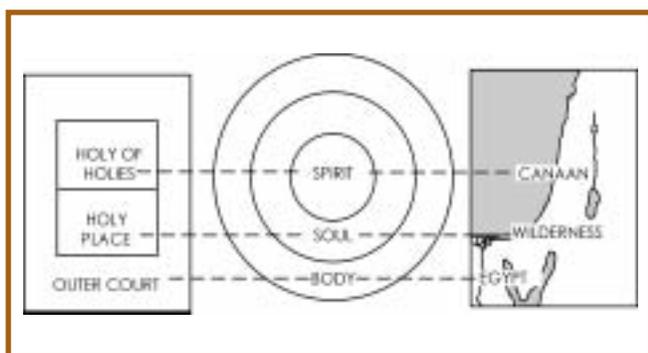
Our being is of three parts—spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23), and our soul is different from our spirit. At the time that we believed in the Lord Jesus and were saved, our spirit was regenerated with the Spirit of God (John 3:6). But we must wait until the Lord Jesus comes back for our body to be redeemed, saved, and transfigured (Rom. 8:23-25; Phil. 3:21). Concerning the saving, or gaining, of our soul, it depends on how we deal with our soul in following the Lord after we are saved and

regenerated. If we lose our soul now for the Lord's sake, we will save it (Matt. 16:25; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25; 1 Pet. 1:9), and it will be saved, or gained, at the Lord's coming back (v. 37). This gaining of the soul will be the reward (v. 35) of the kingdom to the overcoming followers of the Lord (Matt. 16:22-28). (Recovery Version, note 3)

In *The Economy of God* Witness Lee draws upon the scriptural revelation concerning the three parts of created humanity—spirit, soul, and body—and applies it to the wilderness experience of the children of Israel, showing its relationship to the believers' need for transformation:

After the Israelites were delivered and saved from the land of Egypt, they were brought into the wilderness with the intention that they should go on into the land of Canaan. The land of Canaan was their land of rest, a type of the all-inclusive Christ. Christ is the good land of Canaan, and He is our rest. If we are going to enter into the rest, we must enter into Christ. But where is Christ today? We answer that He is in our spirit. The Israelites, who were delivered out of Egypt, instead of going on into Canaan, wandered for many years in the wilderness. What does this typify? It means that many Christians after being saved are simply wandering in the soul. The reason the book to the Hebrews was written is that many Hebrew Christians were saved, but they were wandering in their soul. They would not press on from the wilderness into the good land—that is, into Christ, who dwelt in their spirit. We must not continue to wander in our soul but press on to enter into our spirit, where Christ is our rest.

Let us illustrate further by the following diagram (31-32):



The above diagram shows another unique correlation between the types employed in Hebrews and the three parts of humanity—spirit, soul, and body. In Hebrews the regenerated human spirit is compared to both the Holy of Holies and the good land (10:19, 22; 4:8, 11, 16). The soul is compared to the Holy Place and the wilderness (3:8, 17; 9:2), and the body is associated with the outer court and Egypt (10:5, 10; 11:24-27). The children of

Israel were redeemed while they were in Egypt, but they left this worldly realm to journey through the wilderness in order to enter into the land of promise. They should have sojourned through the wilderness in the Tent of Meeting (Exo. 27:21), the tabernacle, in order to dwell on the holy mountain, Mount Zion (Heb. 12:22), but instead, they allowed the impulses of their untransformed soul to direct them. Hence, they wandered in the wilderness, and they were righteously denied entrance into God's rest.

The component parts of the type of the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness establish the framework for understanding the gospel that is presented in Hebrews: the children of Israel represent genuine believers who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness represents a living that is directed by the fallen impulses of an untransformed soul.

Thankfully, the Lord is still speaking to believers of a "certain

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day" of rest, and His speaking assures us that it still remains that "some should enter into it" (4:6-7). This is the gospel, the good news. In order to enter into the reality of God's corporate rest in Christ, we need to be transformed by partaking of the sanctifying grace of the Lord in our spirit (Rom. 12:2; Heb. 4:16; Phil. 4:23). Transformation is intrinsically related to hearing the voice of the Lord, which is contained in the living and operative word of God. The word of God is able to divide soul from spirit (Heb. 4:12), that is, to divide the fallen elements of our natural life that animate our soul from the righteous elements of the divine life in our regenerated human spirit, enabling us to discern and pursue the superior items of the gospel in God's New Testament economy.

### *The Gospel Being the Living and Operative Word of God*

Although the gospel is a call to enter into God's rest, it is also the means through which we are brought into God's rest because the gospel, as the living and operative word of God, is the power of God unto the salvation of

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our souls (Rom. 1:16; 1 Pet. 1:9). Hence, the word of the gospel is also the means for our transformation because it strengthens the inner man, our regenerated human spirit, and renews our mind (1 John 2:14; Eph. 3:16; 4:23). The type of the wandering of the children of Israel in the second warning section speaks of the need for transformation, and the unveiling of the operation of Christ's heavenly ministry in the subsequent chapters, which brings us to the throne of grace in the Holy of Holies (Heb. 4:16; 10:19), speaks of the reality of being strengthened into the inner man. Both the transformation of our soul and the strengthening of our spirit are accomplished through the living and operative word of God.

When the wandering of the children of Israel in the wilderness is understood as a type of believers who are walking according to the impulses of their untransformed soul rather than their regenerated human spirit (Rom. 8:4), the arrangement and content of verses 12 through 16 in Hebrews 4 come into sharp focus. Verses 12 and 13 conclude the second warning section, saying,

The word of God is living and operative and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of joints and marrow, and able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature that is not manifest before Him, but all things are naked and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we are to give our account.

Then, in verses 14 through 16, Paul begins a new section on the superiority of Christ as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, saying,

Having therefore a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast the confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all respects like us, yet without sin. Let us therefore come forward with boldness to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help.

While there is certainly a sequential connection between the conclusion of the second warning section and the beginning of the section on Christ as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the words *having therefore* in verse 14 indicate at a grammatical level that there is a deeper narrative and thematic connection. The pivotal role of the word of God in verse 12 is central to understanding this connection. In looking back at the example of the children of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, Paul speaks of the power of the living and operative word of God to divide soul from spirit by dealing with the thoughts and intentions of our heart in order to bring us

into the reward of God's rest. In looking forward to Christ's heavenly ministry, Paul speaks of the power of the living and operative word of God in our confession to bring us into our spirit to receive the mercy and find the grace that is needed for our transformation (vv. 14-16). Paul also reveals that there will be a righteous rendering of accounts to God concerning the degree of our transformation when our life and living are laid bare before His eyes (v. 13).

After admonishing the believers to not come short of the promised rest, Paul concludes the second warning section with a reference to God's watchful and judging eyes in verse 13. This reference points back to God's righteous statements of judgment upon the children of Israel in the second warning section. When the disobedience of the children of Israel was made manifest before Him, God righteously declared, "I was displeased with this generation, and I said, They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways; as I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter into My rest!" (3:10-11). His declaration, "They shall not enter into My rest," is repeated verbatim in verses 3 and 5 of chapter 4, and it is echoed by Paul in 3:18, when he refers to the children of Israel, saying, "To whom did He swear that they should not enter into His rest, except to the disobedient?" The principal descriptors associated with "the disobedient" relate to their heart and mind, that is, to their going astray in their heart and not knowing His ways in their mind. Given their hardened, straying heart and unrenewed mind, the children of Israel were positioned to receive God's judgment, not God's reward. If, as genuine believers, we harden our heart and wander in the wilderness of an untransformed soul, we will similarly suffer God's righteous judgment when we give an account of our life and living to Him at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). In order for the Lord's judgment to issue in reward rather than punishment, we need to allow the living and operative word of God to inscribe the reality of the contents of the gospel upon our heart (Heb. 8:10; 10:16) and to operate upon the fallen elements in our soul, an operation that is situated in the center of our tripartite being, our spirit.

Even though Hebrews 4:12 is often used in conjunction with 1 Thessalonians 5:23 as a proof text of the tripartite nature of humanity because it speaks of "the dividing of soul and spirit," it is more than an isolated anthropological statement. It is, in fact, a statement that underscores the difficulty of putting off the old man, our former manner of living, because of the habitual and natural ease in which we walk as the Gentiles walk in the vanity of the mind, wandering in the wilderness of our untransformed soul, rather than walking in our regenerated human spirit (Rom. 8:4-5). In order to put off the old man, we need the living and operative word of God. The heart of man

is deceitful above all things and incurable; it is not possible to even know it (Jer. 17:9). There are no “self-help” tips or books or teachings that are of any value, for such “help” can come only from the “self,” and thus, it is sourced in an incurably deceitful heart. “Self-help” books may produce an outward change of behavior, but they will not deal with the “thoughts and intentions” of the heart. Only the living and operative word of God can touch the “hidden things of darkness and make manifest the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor. 4:5) in order to produce the transformation that will qualify us to receive God’s righteous reward of rest. The verses in the second warning section

describe the children of Israel as falling away from entering into the rest of the good land. With them there were three places: (1) Egypt, from which they were delivered; (2) the wilderness, in which they wandered; and (3) Canaan, into which they entered. Their history in these three places signifies the three stages of their participation in God’s full salvation. This is a type of us, the New Testament believers, in our participation in the full salvation of God. In the first stage we receive Christ and are redeemed and delivered from the world. In the second stage we become wanderers in following the Lord; our wandering always takes place in our soul. In the third stage we partake of and enjoy Christ in a full way; this is experienced in our spirit. When we pursue the pleasures of material and sinful things, we are in the world, typified by Egypt. When we wander in our soul, we are in the wilderness. When we enjoy Christ in our spirit, we are in Canaan. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, they were always murmuring, reasoning, and chiding. This surely took place in their soul, not in their spirit. But Caleb and Joshua believed in the word of God, obeyed the Lord, and pressed toward the goal. This surely took place not in their soul but in their spirit. At that time the receivers of this book, the Hebrew believers, were wondering what they should do with their old Hebrew religion. This wondering in their mind was a wandering in their soul, not an experience of Christ in their spirit. So the writer of this book said that the word of God, i.e., what was quoted from the Old Testament, could pierce into their wondering like a sharp two-edged sword and divide their soul from their spirit. As the marrow is concealed deep in the joints, so the spirit is deep in the soul. The dividing of the marrow from the joints requires mainly the breaking of the joints. In the same principle, the dividing of the spirit from the soul requires the breaking of the soul. The Hebrew believers’ soul, with its wondering mind, its doubting concerning God’s way of salvation, and its considering of its own interests, had to be broken by the living, operative, and piercing word of God that their spirit might be divided from their soul.

Our soul is our very self (Matt. 16:25; cf. Luke 9:25). In

following the Lord we must deny our soul, our very self (Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23). Our spirit is the deepest part of our being, a spiritual organ with which we contact God (John 4:24; Rom. 1:9). It is in our spirit that we are regenerated (John 3:6). It is in our spirit that the Holy Spirit dwells and works (Rom. 8:16). It is in our spirit that we enjoy Christ and His grace (2 Tim. 4:22; Gal. 6:18). Hence, the writer of this book advised the Hebrew believers not to stagger in the wandering of their soul, which soul they had to deny, but to press on into their spirit to partake of and enjoy the heavenly Christ that they might participate in the kingdom rest of His reign in the millennium. If they staggered in the wandering of their soul, they would miss God’s goal and suffer the loss of the full enjoyment of Christ and the kingdom rest. (Recovery Version, Heb. 4:12, note 2)

After connecting the type of the wandering of the children of Israel with the process of transformation through the living and operative word of God, Paul introduces a new section, which speaks of the superiority of

*In order for the Lord's judgment to issue in reward rather than punishment, we need to allow the living and operative word of God to inscribe the reality of the contents of the gospel upon our heart.*

Christ as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (v. 14—5:10; ch. 7). He follows this section by speaking of the superiority of Christ’s new covenant (8:1—10:18). Although these two sections are a further unveiling of the items in God’s full salvation, they are thematically connected with the type of the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness through Paul’s use of the words *having therefore* in 4:14. In his argument concerning the children of Israel being a type of the believers, Gleason comments on the nature of types in general, stating, “The rhetorical success and logical connection of the typological relationship used by the New Testament author depends directly upon the genuineness of the theological correspondence” (342). While there is a theological correspondence between the type of the children of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness and the gospel’s call related to the transformation of the soul through the application of the living and operative word of God, there also is a correspondence between the type of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the gospel’s call to come forward to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace by entering into the Holy of Holies, our regenerated

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human spirit (vv. 14-16; 10:19). In order to cease from wandering in our soul, we need the living and operative word of God, and in order to enter into the Holy of Holies, we need the living and operative word of God, which is ministered by Christ, based on the efficaciousness of His new covenant sacrifice. Transformation involves our soul being divided from our spirit. This is the principal focus of the second warning section. Transformation also involves receiving grace in our regenerated human spirit, which is now the dwelling place of God. This is the principal focus of the following sections, which reveal Christ as a High Priest and as the Mediator of a better covenant based on better sacrifices and better blood (4:14-15; 5:5-6, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1, 6; 9:11, 15; 12:24).

Through the living and operative word of God, which divides soul from spirit, believers are not consigned to living with an evil heart of unbelief (3:12), and there is no need to wander and fall in the wilderness of an untransformed soul (v. 17). Instead, we can enter into God's rest in this age and in the next by receiving the good report contained in the gospel (v. 19). The final five verses in chapter 4 assure us of this firm end to God's speaking of the gospel (3:14). Verses 12 and 13 of chapter 4 speak of the power of the living and operative word to produce a response of faith that results in our soul's transformation and our entrance into God's rest, and verses 14 through 16 speak of the ability of the living and operative word of God to bring us into the full experience of the content of the gospel in our spirit.

### The Content of the Gospel in Hebrews

The content of the gospel in Hebrews, the content that is spoken and received as faith and that is imparted and manifested as glory, is the great salvation spoken of in 1:4—2:18. This great salvation consists of the attainments and obtainments of Christ in His person and work in incarnation and resurrection. His person and work in incarnation assume His eternal, divine status as the One who is the effulgence of God's glory and the impress of His substance (1:3), and His person and work in resurrection assume His divinized status as the One who was designated the Son of God in His humanity on the day of His resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5; 5:5), the day of His begetting.

The attainments of Christ include all the items in God's economy that are unique to His person and work. These items include His incarnation, which involves the mingling of divinity and humanity; His human living, which involves a living according to the highest standard of morality, based on the mingling of divine attributes and human virtues; His crucifixion, which involves the offering of a perfect sacrifice for the satisfaction of God's

righteousness; His resurrection, which involves the divinization of His perfected humanity; and His ascension, which involves being crowned with glory and honor. The attainments of Christ speak of the accomplishment of the great salvation spoken of in Hebrews, and all these attainments are presented in Hebrews 1, either explicitly or implicitly. His crucifixion for the purification of sins speaks of His incarnation, which prepared a body for an offering to God (v. 3; 10:5, 10). His inheritance of a more distinguished name speaks of God's acknowledgement of the perfection in His human living as a genuine God-man who loved righteousness and hated lawlessness (1:4, 9). His being begotten in His humanity as the Son of God speaks of the deifying issue of His resurrection (v. 5). And His being anointed with the oil of exultant joy speaks of His ascension (v. 9).

The obtainments of Christ include all the items in God's economy that have been given to Christ as a result of authoring so great a salvation. These items include His being made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), which involves His lordship over all; His headship, which involves being made Head over all things to the church and being the Head of the Body (Eph. 1:22; 4:15); and His kingship, which involves His unchallenged authority as the One on the throne with the scepter of uprightness (Heb. 1:8). The obtainments of Christ speak of the application of the attainments of Christ to those who are inheriting salvation (v. 14), and all these obtainments of Christ are presented in Hebrews 1, either explicitly or implicitly. His being given the scepter of the kingdom and His being anointed with the oil of exultant joy speak of His being made both Lord and Christ (vv. 8-9). His appointment as Heir of all things and His being anointed "above His partners" speak of His headship over all things generally and over the church particularly (vv. 2, 9). And His sitting at the right hand on the throne with His enemies being a footstool speaks of His kingship (vv. 8, 13).

In addition to presenting the items of Christ's attainments and obtainments as the content of the gospel, Hebrews 1 reveals additional items, which are included in the heavenly ministry of Christ. These include the truth that

He was the very God in eternity past (v. 8); He was the Creator of the earth and the heavens (vv. 10, 2); He is the Upholder of all things and the One who bears all things (v. 3);...He is the firstborn Son of God who will come again (v. 6);...and He will remain forever and ever in eternity future (vv. 11-12). (Recovery Version, v. 5, note 1)

Based on Christ's divinity as God in eternity past, an environment was created for the expression of His eternal power and divine characteristics (Rom. 1:20). God's desire for expression in this environment is focused primarily on

bringing redeemed humanity into His glory to be displayed as an enlarged expression of Himself (Heb. 2:6, 10). Christ affirms this desire, declaring, “Behold, I and the children whom God has given to Me” (v. 13). The extent to which a believer participates in this display in this age will determine the extent to which he will participate in this display in the coming age of the millennial kingdom. When the Firstborn comes again into the inhabited earth, the millennial kingdom will be a reward to believers who have given heed “more abundantly to the things which have been heard,” but it will be a loss to believers who cannot escape God’s just recompense for their neglect of His great salvation in Christ (vv. 1, 3). Eventually, both the overcoming believers and the chastened believers in the kingdom will fully and corporately express the Triune God as the heavenly Jerusalem in eternity future, being joined to the One whose years will not fail (12:5-11, 22; 1:12).

The gospel is based upon the work of Christ in the days of His flesh, during which He authored so great a salvation (2:10). It also is based upon the work of Christ in His heavenly ministry in resurrection as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (v. 17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:10), through which He is now perfecting His great salvation in many sons. The gospel, ultimately, reveals and carries out the work of the glorified God-man, Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, to lead many sons into a corporate expression of His glory (Heb. 2:10; 12:2).

Christ...is now in the heavens as our Minister (8:2) and our High Priest (4:14-15; 7:26), ministering to us the heavenly life, grace, authority, and power and sustaining us to live a heavenly life on earth. He is the Christ now, the Christ today, and the Christ on the throne in the heavens, who is our daily salvation and moment-by-moment supply. (Recovery Version, 1:3, note 4)

As the Author of our salvation, Christ is now ministering the contents of the gospel into believers to lead them into glory (2:10). Through His ministry, believers can be sanctified based on His perfected offering, and apart from sin, eagerly await the salvation of their soul (9:28; 10:14). This is the salvation that God has ordained for us to inherit (1:14).

God’s full salvation, from the forgiveness of sins to the sharing of the coming kingdom with glory...refers not only to what Christ has done and will do for us but also to Himself, the One who is able to save us to the uttermost (7:25). As the Son of God—as God—and as the Son of Man—as man—He is our salvation. His wonderful person plus His splendid work constitute so great a salvation, a salvation that none of us should neglect. Our negligence will cause us to miss this great salvation’s (1) most precious part—the enjoying of Christ as our saving life and

rest in this age; and (2) most glorious part—the inheriting of Christ’s kingdom with glory in the coming age. These two points are fully developed and dealt with in the succeeding chapters of this book. (Recovery Version, 2:3, note 2)

The extent to which we are persuaded of the better things that belong to salvation, and the extent to which we participate in them, will determine our standing before God when we are judged according to the standard of God’s salvation, the content of the gospel (6:9). This judgment will not be based on what we have done in service to God, and it will not be based on our good works or even a positive appraisal from others.<sup>11</sup> It will be based on the degree to which we have worked out the salvation of our soul through hearing and receiving the content of the gospel (Phil. 1:19; 2:12; 1 Pet. 1:9). If our salvation is worked out to the uttermost, there will be a righteous reward, but if we neglect this salvation, forgoing the operation of the living and operative word of God, there will be a just recompense (Heb. 2:2).

*The gospel, ultimately, reveals and carries out the work of the glorified God-man, Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, to lead many sons into a corporate expression of His glory.*

### The Judgment of the Gospel in Hebrews

It is difficult for genuine believers to hear that there is a real possibility of receiving a just recompense of judgment in the coming age, because of the prevailing view that God is stern and unforgiving toward those who reject the gospel but loving and forgiving toward those who have received the gospel. The difficulty in reconciling this seeming incongruity between God’s unqualified love for and righteous judgment of the believers is at the root of many of the suggestions that the intended audience of Hebrews, at least in the warning sections, shifts from genuine believers to nominal or lapsing believers,<sup>12</sup> who have fallen from grace, or to unbelievers, who have never experienced the grace of God. It is easier to accept the idea that it is only lapsing believers who will come short of God’s rest (4:1), that it is only lapsing believers who will fall away and find it impossible to renew themselves unto repentance (6:6), that it is only lapsing believers who, having sinned willfully, have a reasonable expectation of judgment (10:26-27), and that it is only lapsing believers who will fall away from the grace of

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God (12:15) than it is to accept the thought that every believer will have to stand before God's examining eyes to receive His righteous appraisal of the degree of sanctification and transformation in their life and living. The prevailing view of the gospel as an expression of God's love makes this thought unpalatable in the extreme, and it is easy to harden our heart in response to it. Consequently, our mind needs to be renewed in regard to the righteous basis of the gospel in order to properly respond to the gospel.

**A**lthough the gospel of God's full salvation is sourced in His love, it is based on His righteousness. Consequently, even though the grace of God is freely given (Rom. 3:24), it is given only when God's righteousness is satisfied. When we laud God for His love in sending His only begotten Son (John 3:16), it is easy to lose sight of the truth that the gospel is first and foremost a matter of God's righteousness. In Romans 1:16-17 Paul declares that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes...For the righteousness of God is revealed in it out of faith to faith." Thus, the power of the gospel is linked with the satisfaction of God's righteousness. Witness Lee writes,

In John 3:16 God's love is the source and motive of God's salvation. In Eph. 2:5, 8 God's grace is the means of God's salvation. Here God's righteousness is the power of God's salvation. God's righteousness, which is solid and steadfast, is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14) and the base on which His kingdom is built (Rom. 14:17). Legally, both love and grace can fluctuate, but righteousness cannot. It is even more so with God's righteousness. It is God's righteousness, not ours, that is revealed in the gospel of God. Hence, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. (Recovery Version, Rom. 1:17, note 1)

Later, in chapter 3, when Paul speaks in detail of God's way of justification, he stresses the importance of righteousness in relation to the redeeming blood of Christ, showing that grace, which flows because of the blood, is dependent upon the satisfaction of God's righteousness. The believers are

justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth as a propitiation place through faith in His blood, for the demonstrating of His righteousness, in that in His forbearance God passed over the sins that had previously occurred, with a view to the demonstrating of His righteousness in the present time, so that He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus. (vv. 24-26)

When we consider God's sending of His Son, it is easy to assume that the resulting salvation was merely a matter of

unworthy recipients receiving His unmerited favor because of His love. However, in *The Gospel of God* Watchman Nee points out that the sending of the Son was necessary in order to satisfy God's righteousness. While the incarnation was motivated by love (John 3:16), it was required by righteousness.

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth was God's requirement in righteousness; it was not God's requirement in grace. This is a very serious word. If there had been love without righteousness, the Lord Jesus would not have needed to come to the earth, and the cross would have been unnecessary. Because of the problem of righteousness the Lord Jesus had to come. Without righteousness, God could save us any way He wants to. He could overlook our sins, or He could forgive them lightly. He could take a permissive attitude toward our sins, or He could be completely unconcerned about them. If God said, "Since all have sinned, I will let you go this time; just do not sin again," there would be no need for a Jesus of Nazareth in the first place. Apart from the requirement of righteousness, there was no need for Jesus of Nazareth to come. The coming of Jesus of Nazareth was a requirement of righteousness. (85)

**T**he gospel reveals both God's righteousness and God's love. God's righteousness demands death as the proper payment for the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23). God's love prepares a substitutionary sacrifice for the payment of these wages. Since sin and sins offend God's righteousness and justifiably call forth His wrath, God had to find a way to demonstrate His righteousness in His justification of us. This way involved the preparation of a body through the incarnation of the Son to be a sacrifice to propitiate for us (Heb. 10:5; 2:17). Without His righteousness being satisfied, God has no choice but to righteously punish us for our sins. Although this would demonstrate His righteousness, it would not show forth His love. Conversely, He could show forth His love by not punishing us, but this would offend His righteousness. "Because He takes away the punishment and bears it for us, there is both righteousness and love" (Nee 86-87). This shows that God's love is palliative, but His righteousness is foundational.

When we were unbelievers, the word of the gospel came to us as a word of His righteousness through His love. In response to hearing the word and believing, our faith was accounted to us as righteousness (Rom. 4:5, 9). Through faith and in faith our deadened spirit was enlivened because of righteousness (Eph. 2:5; Rom. 8:10). Based on our righteous standing in Christ, we are now being perfected in a process that begins with righteousness in our spirit and that produces sanctification in our soul. The ultimate expression of the righteousness in our spirit and the sanctification in our soul will be the redemption of

our body in glory, fulfilling the perfection of our salvation (1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 2:10; cf. Rom. 8:6, 10, 21, 23).

**T**he requirement to satisfy God's righteousness in order to receive grace has not been abrogated in the life and living of a believer, because righteousness is an eternal characteristic of God; it can never be set aside. God's righteous requirement must be satisfied in order for unbelievers to be reconciled to God, and God's righteous requirement must be "fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit" (v. 4). The demand of God's righteousness is ever present, and the standard for its expression is even elevated because the righteous Christ indwells our spirit (Matt. 5—7). The maturity of a believer is not measured only by love but by the extent to which the word of righteousness empowers and animates his living (Heb. 5:13). Consequently, the word that Christ, as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, is ministering to believers as the gospel is the word of righteousness.

*Melchizedek means king of righteousness, and king of Salem means king of peace (v. 2). As the King of righteousness (Isa. 32:1), Christ made all things right with God and made all things right with one another. Righteousness issues in peace (Isa. 32:17). As the King of peace (Isa. 9:6), Christ, through righteousness, brings in peace between God and us, and in such a peace He fulfills the ministry of His priesthood. He is the King who becomes the Priest; thus, His priesthood is kingly, royal (1 Pet. 2:9). (Recovery Version, Heb. 7:1, note 2)*

The ministry of Christ as a High Priest is a ministry of righteousness,<sup>13</sup> and it brings us to the throne of grace through the better blood of His better sacrifice. In the type of the priestly service, the altar of sacrifice comes before the Ark of grace. This shows that grace, which produces sanctification and transformation, depends upon the continual satisfaction of God's righteousness. Even though Christ's sacrifice is eternally efficacious, the believers still need to come forward to the throne of grace. It is our responsibility to not harden our heart to the voice of the Lord, to the operation of the living word of God as the gospel. Based on the superiority of Christ in His person and work, there is nothing that prevents us from coming forward other than an evil heart of unbelief (3:12). For both unbelievers and believers, unbelief will be met with judgment and punishment. For unbelievers this judgment and punishment will be eternal (John 3:18; Mark 16:16), but for believers this judgment and punishment will be dispensational. In the latter case, a believer's failure to meet God's standard of righteousness through grace will result in a righteous punishment from Him who judges righteously as the righteous Judge (1 Pet. 2:23; 2 Tim. 4:8). The Lord affirms this in Matthew 5:20, saying, "I say to you that unless your righteousness

surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens." Thankfully, however, God's can also bestow a righteous reward upon believers who have held fast the confession (Heb. 10:23). Our response to the content of the gospel will determine whether or not God's judgment of us in the coming millennial kingdom will result in a reward or a punishment.

### *The Foretaste of Reward in the Age of Grace*

Hebrews reveals that there is a righteous reward for hearing and responding to the word of the Lord as the gospel. There is a reward in the age of grace, and there is a reward in the coming millennial kingdom. For those who hear the voice of the Lord, the reward in the age of grace is a foretaste of the reward in the coming kingdom. This foretaste includes (1) freedom from the slavery of death and from the encumbrances of sin, (2) the corporate enjoyment of God in the church, and (3) participation in the high peak of God's salvation, the deification of our

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redeemed humanity, through which we become the same as God in life and nature but not in the Godhead.

**D**eath was the lot of the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness, their carcasses strewn along the way. Even more, however, the fear of death clouded their mind—"Why does Jehovah bring us into this land to fall by the sword?" (Num. 14:3), and it loomed over their unwise choices and decisions—"Let us appoint a captain, and let us return to Egypt" (v. 4). In the age of grace those who receive Christ with His attainments and obtainments, as the content of the gospel, receive the One who partook of flesh and blood so that "through death He might destroy him who has the might of death, that is, the devil, and might release those who because of the fear of death through all their life were held in slavery" (Heb. 2:14-15). The Lord's destruction of the devil is a matter of righteousness. When Christ was made sin on the cross and crucified, the devil with his sinful life and nature was crucified as well, and his power over humanity was broken. In particular, his enslavement of humanity was terminated with the release of his captives and the plundering

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of his house (Luke 4:18; Matt. 12:29; cf. Exo. 3:22). Apart from hearing and receiving the word of righteousness, there is no escape from death and the fear of death in our soul. It is a great reward to live in the realm of the divine life, free of the fear of death, knowing in truth that death only heightens the degree of our being with Christ (Phil. 1:23).

**T**he fear of death produces isolation and separation, and it deprives the believers of the corporate enjoyment of the oil of exultant joy that is upon the partners of Christ (Heb. 1:9; 3:14). The fine anointing oil that was poured out upon the head of Aaron the high priest ran down to the hem of his garments, reaching, in type, all the members of the corporate Body of Christ (Psa. 133:2). The anointing of Christ with the oil of exultant joy was the issue of His loving righteousness and hating lawlessness (Heb. 1:9). The corporate enjoyment of God in the church, as the mutual dwelling place of God and redeemed humanity, is also typified in Hebrews by the tabernacle of God in the wilderness. The fullest enjoyment of God is not an individual matter; it is a corporate matter involving the tabernacle. In regard to the tabernacle, the voice of the Lord in Hebrews speaks to brothers, saying, "Let us therefore come forward to the throne of grace" (4:16) and "Let us come forward to the Holy of Holies" (10:19, 22). In the assembled church, in the corporate mingled spirit, the Lord declares the Father's name, the reality of the Father, to us, as His brothers (2:12), and as songs of praise flow out of the grace in our heart (Col. 3:16), there is the mutual enjoyment of God and redeemed humanity. Knowing God as our Father in this age is a great reward. It directs our prayers (Matt. 6:6, 8-9), it brings in revelation (16:17; Eph. 1:17), it strengthens and supplies us (3:14-16; John 6:32), it assuages our grief (Heb. 12:11), and it glorifies us (Eph. 3:16; John 17:5, 22). The corporate enjoyment of God can also be seen in the running of the race with endurance together with the living saints and even with the saints who are observing our progress as a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1).

If we hear and receive the word of righteousness, our pursuit of the Lord will not be halting and individualistic, and we will not fall short of the enjoyment of Christ that is our righteous inheritance, which is enjoyment that flows in corporate fellowship like milk and honey in our allotted portion of the land, the all-inclusive Christ (Col. 1:12). The allotted portion of the saints in the light

refers to the lot of the inheritance, as illustrated by the allotment of the good land of Canaan given to the children of Israel for their inheritance (Josh. 14:1). The New Testament believers' inheritance, their allotted portion, is not a physical land; it is the all-inclusive Christ. He is the allotted portion of the saints as their divine inheritance for

their enjoyment. (Recovery Version, Col. 1:12, note 2)

Only by being with the saints in the light is our inheritance fully realized, because it is only with the saints that we can enjoy songs of ascent pouring forth with praise from our being, as we corporately experience the flow of the anointing oil, and come fully into the house of God on the high peak of Mount Zion, which is a type of the corporate perfection of the overcoming saints in the age of grace.

The high peak of God's salvation is the corporate perfection, the divinization, of redeemed humanity. This process is not sacramental in nature but transformative in nature. It is a process in which the divine life in our regenerated human spirit spreads to our soul and, ultimately, redeems our body in glory. The gospel in Hebrews matches this process by calling us, as believers, to come forward to the throne of grace in the Holy of Holies in order to receive grace for the transformation of our soul. The gospel is a call to live in our spirit based on the better blood and better sacrifice of Christ so that the power of His indestructible life can save us to the uttermost (7:16, 25). This saving requires mercy and grace for timely help in this age, and in this grace our heart is confirmed and strengthened (13:9), our standing is made firm (12:15), and our service is made acceptable under the covering of God's unshakable kingdom (v. 28).

**L**iving in the reality of the high peak of God's salvation is not an impossible demand; it is something that we are well able to do based on Christ's ministry as a High Priest and His offering as a better sacrifice. Such a living was a reality to Paul, as he indicated in 4:2-3, saying, "Indeed we have had the good news announced to us, even as they also; but the word heard did not profit them, not being mixed together with faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter into the rest." The word of righteousness was profitable to Paul. He believed, he spoke, and those who received his word of exhortation entered with him into the foretaste of the reward of rest in this age (2 Cor. 4:13; Heb. 13:22). In Hebrews 12:22 Paul also speaks of coming forward to Mount Zion, which is an experiential type of the overcoming, transformed saints living in the high peak of God's perfecting and divinizing salvation. Paul spoke of the things that belong to salvation (6:9), and he was persuaded that these better things were in the realm of the believers' corporate apprehension (Eph. 3:18). He had this confidence because he knew that the New Testament ministry of Christ, as a High Priest, righteously issues in the salvation of the soul.

God's righteous reward in this age is a foretaste of the reward in the coming kingdom, and we should, as a matter of righteousness, give heed more abundantly to the

things which we have heard (Heb. 2:1). If we are partaking of the Holy Spirit and tasting the good word of God, we surely will have a foretaste of the powers of the age to come (6:4-5). Witness Lee puts our responsibility to be partakers and tasters in this age into perspective by speaking of our accountability to be in the things pertaining to God and His salvation:

What we are privileged to enjoy in Christ is the foretaste of the blessings in the coming kingdom. The proper enjoyment of this foretaste will usher us into the full taste of the kingdom blessings. If we do not enjoy Christ today as our good land...how can we enter into His rest in the kingdom and inherit the earth with Him? If we do not exercise our priesthood today to contact Him and prayerfully minister to Him, how can we fulfill our priestly duty in the kingdom? If we do not exercise our spirit with the God-given authority to rule our self, our flesh, our entire being, and the enemy with all his power of darkness today, how can we be Christ's co-kings and rule the nations with Him in His kingdom (Rev. 2:26-27)? Our enjoyment of Christ and the practice of the priesthood and kingship today are the preparation and qualification for our participating in Christ's kingdom tomorrow! (Recovery Version, Heb. 12:16, note 1)

### *The Realization of the Reward in the Age of the Kingdom*

In the age of the kingdom, the items in the foretaste of the reward will be fully realized. This realization involves (1) a righteous exemption from the dispensational punishment that awaits those who have not matured and are not approved according to God's standard of righteousness, and (2) the enjoyment of a corporate rest in God.

The coming kingdom will begin when the Firstborn comes again into the inhabited earth as the Word of God (1:6; Rev. 19:11-13), and it will be a reward to believers who have participated in the foretaste of the kingdom in the age of grace. The reward of the millennial kingdom, however, will be withheld from believers who have not allowed the living and operative word to produce the necessary transformation in them that God righteously requires and that God righteously made provision for through Christ's heavenly ministry. The loss of the kingdom reward is a righteous punishment, but at a deeper level, it is an expression of the Father's loving discipline. The maturity of sonship is produced through discipline (Heb. 12:5-8), and there is no possibility of avoiding the Father's discipline because we all are encumbered with the sin that animated our former manner of living. This sin has damaged and perverted the function of our soul. Consequently, our soul-life must be denied in this age in order to be gained in the next age (Matt. 16:24-26). If we do not deny our soul-life when we are in the midst of

circumstances and environments that convey our Father's discipline, we will lose our soul in the coming age. Our soul-life must be denied in order for our soul to be saved. Denying our soul-life involves exercise based on training through discipline (Heb. 12:11). Hence, every believer must, at some point in time, either in this age or in the next, receive and accept the loving discipline of our Father. It is better to be disciplined for a few days in this age than for many in the coming age (v. 10). Although God's discipline in the age of grace may not seem to be a matter of joy, it will yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness and enable us to partake of His holiness for our transformation (vv. 10-11). The believers who experience the maturing discipline of the Father of spirits in this age (v. 9) will be exempted from His discipline in the coming age and, instead, will realize the benefits and blessings of the kingdom.

If we take the Spirit's exercise and God's discipline in the reality of the kingdom today, we will receive the Lord's reward and enter into the enjoyment of the coming

*Every believer must, at some point in time, either in this age or in the next, receive and accept the loving discipline of our Father. It is better to be disciplined for a few days in this age than for many in the coming age.*

Sabbath rest (4:9) in the manifestation of the kingdom in the coming age; otherwise, we will miss the coming kingdom, we will not be rewarded with the manifestation of the kingdom at the Lord's coming back, we will have no right to enter into the glory of the kingdom to participate in Christ's reign in the millennial kingdom, and we will lose our birthright and therefore will be unable to inherit the earth in the coming age, to be the royal priests serving God and Christ in His manifested glory, and to be Christ's co-kings ruling all the nations with His divine authority (Rev. 20:4, 6). To miss the coming kingdom and to forfeit our birthright does not mean that we will perish. It means that we will lose the reward but not our salvation...We will suffer loss but still will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:14-15). This is the basic concept on which all five warnings in this book are given and with which they are all pervaded. All the negative points of these warnings are related to the suffering of the loss of the reward in the coming kingdom, whereas all the positive points are related to the reward and enjoyment of the kingdom...The warnings in Hebrews do not refer to the loss of eternal salvation but to the loss of the kingdom

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reward. The Hebrew believers had received the kingdom, but they risked losing the reward in the manifestation of the kingdom if they shrank back from the grace of God, from God's new covenant way. This was the writer's main concern in warning the staggering Hebrew believers. (Recovery Version, 12:28, note 1)

**T**he reward of the kingdom primarily involves the enjoyment of God's rest in Christ. Disciplined and transformed believers, who have participated in the fulfillment of the will of God on earth, will enter into God's rest (Matt. 7:21), which He righteously promised, and they will also enjoy a special portion that has been laid up for them by the Father, who is well pleased to give them the kingdom (Luke 12:32). This special portion will involve the experience and enjoyment of Christ as the God-prepared land of rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9).

Christ is rest to the saints in three stages: (1) in the church age, as the heavenly Christ, the One who rests from His work and sits on the right hand of God in the heavens, He is the rest to us in our spirit (Matt. 11:28-29); (2) in the millennial kingdom, after Satan is removed from this earth (Rev. 20:1-3), Christ with the kingdom will be the rest in a fuller way to the overcoming saints, who will be His co-kings (Rev. 20:4, 6), sharing and enjoying His rest; (3) in the new heaven and new earth, after all the enemies, including death, the last enemy, have been made subject to Him (1 Cor. 15:24-27), Christ, as the all-conquering One, will be the rest in the fullest way to all God's redeemed for eternity...The rest in the first two stages is a prize to His diligent seekers, who not only are redeemed but also have enjoyed Him in a full way, thus becoming the overcomers, whereas the rest in the third stage is not a prize but the full portion allotted to all the redeemed ones...It is in the second stage of His being our rest that Christ will take possession of the whole earth as His inheritance (Psa. 2:8; Heb. 2:5-6), making it His kingdom for a thousand years (Rev. 11:15). All His overcoming followers who seek and enjoy Him as their rest in the first stage will participate in His reign in the millennium (Rev. 20:4, 6; 2 Tim. 2:12)...

According to what is depicted by the experiences of the children of Israel, not all believers who have been redeemed through Christ will partake of Christ as a prize, as their rest, their satisfaction, in both the church age and the coming kingdom; only those who, after being redeemed, seek Christ diligently will partake of Him in such a way. This is why the apostle Paul, though fully redeemed, was still pursuing toward the goal that he might gain Christ as the prize (Phil. 3:10-14). (Recovery Version, Heb. 4:9, note 1)

The reward of the kingdom awaits believers who have

heard the word of Christ's great salvation and mixed it with faith in order to let the living word of God divide their soul from their spirit. The reward of the kingdom also awaits wandering believers who have received the word of the apostle's exhortation and now bear with it with endurance (13:22). The loss of the kingdom reward awaits believers who have hardened their heart to the voice of the Lord and gone astray in heart and mind. The loss of the kingdom reward also awaits believers who have forgotten the apostle's exhortation, which reasons with them as sons (12:5).

**B**eing dull of hearing and inexperienced in the word of righteousness (5:11, 13), these believers lack the necessary maturity in sonship to righteously inherit the kingdom (6:1). As infants in need of fuller growth (5:13-14), they can only be disapproved by God according to His standard of righteousness (6:8). Despite God's disapproval, however, they are only near a curse, because the Father's love will support and sustain them during the discipline that will be meted out to them in a realm of darkness, apart from His righteous sons who will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matt. 22:13; 25:30; 13:43). God's withholding of the kingdom reward from those in outer darkness is the issue of His righteous judgment on believers who have failed to enter the locus of the Body—the corporate mingled spirit as the Holy of Holies, who have abandoned the principle of the Body—the assembling together of the believers, who have forsaken the ministry of the Body—the mutual exhortation of one another, and who have shunned the manifestation of the Body—the spectacle of reproach, affliction, boldness, and endurance (Heb. 10:22, 25, 33, 35-36). Such believers have ceased from running the race, and have, instead, allowed the entangling encumbrances of sin inwardly and the contradiction by sinners against themselves outwardly to affect their willingness to accept God's discipline and to participate in the carrying out of God's will in order to obtain the promise of the kingdom (12:1, 3; 10:36).

### The Goal of the Gospel in Hebrews

The goal of the gospel in Hebrews is the fulfillment of the will of God. In 10:7-9 the Lord speaks of the will of God, saying,

“Behold, I have come (in the roll of the book it is written concerning Me) to do Your will, O God.” Saying above, “Sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You did not desire nor delight in” (which are offered according to the law), He then has said, “Behold, I have come to do Your will.”

In 2:3-4 Paul speaks of the will of God, implicitly acknowledging that his exhortation for the believers to

participate in the great salvation authored by Christ is an instantiation of the ministry that was distributed to him by the Holy Spirit. He asks,

How shall we escape if we have neglected so great a salvation, which, having had its beginning in being spoken by the Lord, has been confirmed to us by those who heard, God bearing witness with them both by signs and wonders and by various works of power and by distributions of the Holy Spirit according to His will?

Ultimately, the believers' participation in the fulfillment of the will of God, through their experience of the contents of the gospel, is the central goal of the Lord's speaking and the apostle's exhortation in Hebrews. In order to obtain the promise, the believers must be those who have "done the will of God" (10:36). The fulfillment of the will of God is the driving force behind the gospel presented in Hebrews. It is the reason for the coming of the Lord in incarnation (v. 7), for the preparation of the Lord's body as a sacrifice for sin, for the resurrection of Christ as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, for the establishment of a better covenant that enables God and redeemed humanity to be fully mingled in the divine life and holy nature of God, for the apostle's unveiling of the economy of God's great salvation, and for the believers' substantiation, conviction, and application of this economy in faith (11:1; 1 Tim. 1:4).

Accordingly, the will of God is not related to the fulfillment of a "plan" and "purpose" for our individual lives; it is related to the fulfillment of the eternal economy of God that He purposed in Himself (Eph. 1:9), which can only reflect what God is in His intrinsic being, an eternally coexisting and coinhering triune expression of the divine life, an expression that is full of righteousness, holiness, and glory. Bringing redeemed humanity into the reality of His triune being for the enlargement of His corporate expression is the will of God and the focus of Hebrews. This corporate expression is centered on the church as the dwelling place of God in the age of grace, the overcoming believers as the Mount Zion of God in the age of the kingdom, and the church as the New Jerusalem throughout eternity future.

The will of God is focused on the church, which displays the corporate perfection of redeemed humanity and which is the mutual dwelling place of God in humanity and of humanity in God. In the typology of Hebrews, the Holy of Holies and the good land represent this mutual dwelling place. In the reality of the new covenant, which is unveiled in Hebrews, this mutual dwelling place is the corporate mingled spirit of the believers (Eph. 2:22). The content in Hebrews reflects the will of God because it speaks and exhorts believers to enter into God's rest and

to enter into the Holy of Holies (4:3, 11; 10:19, 22). The call to enter into God's rest occurs in chapter 4, after Paul has spoken of Christ's authoring of His great salvation, and the call to enter into the Holy of Holies occurs in chapter 10, after Paul has spoken of Christ as a High Priest who ministers the good things that have come into being into the believers in order to perfect in them the salvation that He authored (2:10; 9:11; 12:2). In this ministry Christ is able to save to the uttermost those who come forward to God through Him (7:25). His salvation involves our corporate satisfaction of His righteousness (10:38), our corporate partaking of His holiness (12:10), and our corporate expression of His glory (2:10). Hence, the gospel of this salvation ultimately speaks of the corporate perfection of redeemed humanity in the Triune God.

If we do not harden our hearts to the living and operative word of God, which comes to us through the speaking of the Lord and the exhortation of the apostle in Hebrews, there will be a hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2, 5). In

*The loss of the kingdom reward awaits believers who have hardened their heart to the voice of the Lord and gone astray in heart and mind, and to believers who have forgotten the apostle's exhortation, which reasons with them as sons.*

the realm of faith, we will gain our souls in sanctification, we will be righteously rewarded, and the Triune God will be corporately enlarged and expressed. As believers, we should welcome the fact that the word of the gospel is directed toward us. We should enjoy the rich content that Christ is ever living to minister and impart into us. And we should appreciate the fact that our Father, who desires to give us the kingdom, will righteously reward those through whom His righteousness, holiness, and glory are expressed in the fulfillment of His eternal will. **AFC**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In my initial article related to Hebrews, "Economy, Dispensing, Organic Union, and Corporate Expression in the Epistle to the Hebrews," I stated my view that Paul was the probable author of Hebrews, which I repeat below:

In contrast to much of the scholarship that is reluctant or refuses to ascribe authorship of this Epistle to the apostle Paul, I am willing to accept it without any sense

of consternation. The lack of a claim of authorship is fully in keeping with Paul's emphasis that this Epistle comes through the speaking of God in the Son. Any claim of authorship, therefore, would have undermined the attention that Paul seeks to focus on Christ, the Son. In reviewing the capacity of all the known New Testament writers, Paul alone stands out as having the necessary understanding of the contents of the old covenant, being once a Pharisee, even a son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6), or as having the constitution of spiritual experiences under the new covenant. "The mentioning of Timothy in such an intimate way" in 13:23 is also "a strong proof that this book was written by the apostle Paul" (Recovery Version, Heb. 13:23, note 1). (45)

<sup>2</sup>The presentation of the gospel in Romans and in Hebrews spans the entirety of each Epistle, and the intended recipients of both Epistles are believers, not unbelievers. In Romans, Paul speaks of his desire to go to Rome to announce the gospel to the called saints in Rome, to those who, in turn, would mutually encourage him through the faith in them (1:7, 12, 15). Through his announcement of the gospel to the Gentile believers in Rome, Paul desired to establish them (v. 11; 16:25), that is, to build them up according to his proclamation of Jesus Christ. Hebrews is equally a proclamation of Jesus Christ in His ongoing heavenly ministry, a proclamation that Paul desired would build upon the rudiments of the beginning of the oracles of God in order to bring the Jewish believers on to maturity (5:12).

The goal of the gospel is to bring many sons into glory to be the corporate expression and corporate dwelling place of God, which is the church as the Body of Christ, the one new man. Those who have been predestinated unto sonship come from those whose only association is with the fallen race of Adam, the Gentiles, and from those who are additionally associated with the called race of Abraham, the Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles were reconciled in one Body to God in Christ through His death on the cross (Eph. 2:15-16). In order to carry out God's economy of salvation, the gospel of peace has been announced to those who were near, the Jews, and those who were far off, the Gentiles (v. 17). A full announcing of the gospel to Gentile believers is contained in Romans, and a full announcing of the gospel to Jewish believers is contained in Hebrews. Since the lineal inheritance of Gentile believers is one only of sin, Romans speaks of the operation of God's plan of salvation largely against the backdrop of God's condemnation of the fallen race of Adam (ch. 1). Since the lineal inheritance of Jewish believers is one both of sin and promise, Hebrews speaks of the operation of God's plan of salvation largely against the backdrop of God's promise to the called race of Abraham, the children of Israel (2:16; 6:13-15; 7:1-10).

<sup>3</sup>Almost every substantive commentary on Hebrews begins with an examination of the intended audience. Most indicate that the audience consists of Jewish believers who are in danger of abandoning the new covenant promises and their inheritance

in Christ. The troublesome matters contained in the warning passages, which seem to indicate that salvation can be forfeited as a result of falling away from the living God (3:12; 10:31), cause other commentators, who do not adhere to Arminian doctrine, to suggest that, at least in these passages, Paul is speaking to unbelievers. Hopefully, a deeper understanding of the righteous consequences of our response to the speaking of the Lord as the gospel in this Epistle will reinforce the fact that the intended recipients are genuine believers, who are in danger of losing the coming kingdom reward, not in danger of losing their eternal salvation.

<sup>4</sup>See "The Exhortation to Participate in the Fulfillment of the Eternal Will of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews: the Corporate Perfection of Redeemed Humanity" in *Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. XVI.1, Spring 2011, pages 33-48.

<sup>5</sup>See "The Promise, Authoring, and Corporate Inheritance of Salvation as Deification in the Epistle to the Hebrews" in *Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. XV.2, Fall 2010, pages 49-62.

<sup>6</sup>Gleason also notes,

The description of the readers as "holy brethren" (3:1), "partakers of Christ" (3:14), "beloved" (6:9), and the frequent use of "we" (e.g., 2:1-3; 4:14-16) and "us" (e.g., 4:1, 11, 16) indicates that the author considered them fellow believers. Some claim the warnings are parenthetical to the main message and are intended only for unbelievers mixed in among a Christian congregation. However, this seems unlikely since the strongest indications of a genuinely Christian audience occur *within* the warning passages. (338)

<sup>7</sup>The good land, as a type of the all-inclusive Christ, is covered in more detail in the first article in this issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, pages 13-14.

<sup>8</sup>Although the good land typifies the all-inclusive Christ, our experience of Christ in our regenerated human spirit, of which the good land is also a type, is frustrated by the inhabitants of the land. The pagan tribes signify various aspects of our natural life, including a reprobate mentality, which we all possess. In commenting on the inhabitants of the land, who are spoken of in Exodus 23:23, Witness Lee writes,

History shows that the pagan tribes in the land were the source of Israel's sin against God (cf. v. 33). This indicates that our natural life is the source of our sins. In the sight of God, those who live according to the natural life are sinning continually, whether they do good or evil. Because the natural life frustrates us from possessing Christ and enjoying Him, we must hate it (Luke 14:26) and, as we grow in Christ, be willing to drive it out. (Recovery Version, Exo. 23:23, note 1)

<sup>9</sup>Spiritual warfare is needed in order to take captive every thought of a believer unto the obedience of Christ. The willingness to engage in this warfare, which is typified by Caleb's willingness to go up at once to possess the good land, is associated

with the announcing of the gospel in 2 Corinthians 10:16.

<sup>10</sup>The heart of an unbeliever in Ephesians 4:18 is characterized by the word *hardness*, which speaks of the natural constitution of the heart of an unregenerated person. By nature and constitution every unbeliever has a hard heart, a heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26). The heart of the believers in Hebrews 3 and 4 is characterized by the word *hardened*, which speaks of a willful hardening of the heart. In regeneration every believer receives a heart of flesh, a softened heart. An unbeliever's heart is hard by nature; a believer's heart is hardened by choice. Consequently, every believer will have to give an account of his responses to the speaking of the Son in his wanderings in the wilderness (4:13).

<sup>11</sup>Outward activities and service are not the measures that the Lord will employ at His judgment seat, because there can be many false motivations and evil intentions associated with the outward activities of the believers. He will not recognize many things done in His name because He was not the source of those actions done in His name, nor do those actions bear the imprint of sanctification. At a deep level, the only matter that will count is the degree of our transformation, our sanctification. Without sanctification we will be charged to depart from the Lord (Matt. 7:23; Luke 13:27), and we will not see Him (Heb. 12:14). The transformation that we need depends upon the living word of God operating in our being in this age, because this is the age in which it is possible for us to participate in the sanctifying ministry of Christ as our High Priest. The New King James Version Study Bible reiterates the role of the word of God at the judgment seat of Christ, stating,

**The word of God** is the measuring stick Christ will use at the judgment (see 2 Cor. 5:10). God's message is alive and active, penetrating the innermost parts of a person. It distinguishes what is natural and what is spiritual, as well as the **thoughts** (reflections) and **intents** (insights) of a person. The word of God exposes the natural and spiritual motivations of a believer's heart. (2082)

<sup>12</sup>I am not using the terms *nominal* and *lapsing* as precise definitive descriptors because there are many imprecise notions among various commentators concerning the characteristics of those who are being warned in Hebrews. *Nominal* tends to refer to those who call themselves Christians but who have not truly believed into the Lord and received the Lord. To some *lapsing* refers to "backslidden" believers whose faith has been undermined by profligate living, while to others it refers to believers who have lost their salvation, and it often is associated with the "unpardonable sin" of blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). There is no need for interpretive nuance, however, since the believers in these passages are simply regarded as believers, all of whom will "receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

<sup>13</sup>In a footnote to 2 Corinthians 3:9, which says, "If there is

glory with the ministry of condemnation, much more the ministry of righteousness abounds with glory," Witness Lee writes,

The ministry of the new covenant is a ministry of the Spirit who gives life (vv. 8, 6), because the new covenant brings in God's righteousness unto life (Rom. 5:18, 21). Hence, it is also the ministry of righteousness, the ministry of justification. The focus of the ministry of the new covenant is thus both the Spirit as the life supply, and righteousness, the living out and genuine expression of Christ (the image of God), who as the Spirit is our life (v. 17). (Recovery Version, note 2)

This verse also shows a connection between righteousness and glory rather than a connection between love and glory. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, but only righteousness can bring us into glory. If we do not give heed to the things spoken in righteousness and concerning righteousness, we will not participate in the glory of the coming kingdom.

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