



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY  
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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## The Doctrines of Grace

### Humanity's Radical Corruption (Part-2)

(Continuation from last month)

Total depravity is the first of Calvinism's famous five points. It is somewhat unfortunate that the doctrine is called “**total depravity**” because this name can be misleading. It has prevailed because it fits the familiar acrostic **TULIP**. Total depravity makes up the **(T)** of **TULIP**. The term is misleading because it suggests a moral condition of *utter depravity*. *Utter depravity* means a person is as wicked as he can possibly be. *Utter* suggests both total and complete corruption, lacking even in civil virtue.

The doctrine of total depravity, however, does not teach that man is as wicked as he could possibly be. For example, Adolf Hitler, who often serves as the paradigm of human evil, surely had some behavioral patterns that were not utterly base. Perhaps Hitler loved his mother and at times was even kind to her (a hypothesis that may not fit the likes of Nero).

### Table 1 The TULIP's First Petal

1. **Total depravity**  
Humanity's radical corruption
2. **Unconditional election**  
God's sovereign choice
3. **Limited atonement**  
Christ's purposeful atonement
4. **Irresistible grace**  
The Spirit's effective call
5. **Perseverance of the saints**  
God's preservation of the saints

### MORAL ABILITY

As we noted earlier, much of the controversy between **Pelagius** and **Augustine** focused on the issue of the freedom of the human will. **Pelagius** believed the doctrine of original sin does violence to human freedom and responsibility. If **Augustine** assessed original sin correctly and we lack the ability not to sin (**non posse non peccare**), what does this do to free will? **The Westminster Confession of Faith** declares: “Man, by his fall into

a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”<sup>4</sup>

If ever the Reformed doctrine of total depravity has been crystallized into one brief statement, it is here. The moral inability of fallen man is the core concept of the doctrine of total depravity or radical corruption. If one embraces this aspect of the t in tulip, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic. One cannot embrace the t and reject any of the other four letters with any degree of consistency.

Let us look carefully at this succinct summary of the Reformation concept of moral inability. First, the confession says that as a result of the fall, man **“hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation.”** Something has been not only lost, but wholly lost. It has been lost totally and in its entirety. It is not a partial loss or diminution of power or ability. It is a radical and complete loss. Yet this does not mean that the will’s ability to choose has been lost completely. What has been lost is the ability to will **“any good accompanying salvation.”**

We have already discussed the sinner’s ability to perform works of civil virtue. These deeds conform outwardly to the law of God, but they are not motivated by a love for God.

The moral ability lost in original sin is therefore not the ability to be outwardly **“moral,”** but the ability to incline oneself to the things of God. In this spiritual dimension we are morally dead.

The confession declares that the natural man is **“altogether averse from that good, and [he is] dead in sin.”** This summarizes the biblical description of fallen man. Paul describes the condition as follows:

#### **Ephesians 2:1-5 (NASB)**

<sup>1</sup> **And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,**

<sup>2</sup> **in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobe-**

**ence.**

<sup>3</sup> **Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.**

<sup>4</sup> **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,**

<sup>5</sup> **even when we were dead in our transgressions, [quickened-KJV] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),**

In this passage Paul speaks of the Spirit’s work in **“quickening”** us or regenerating us from our fallen condition. He uses the image of being **“made alive.”** This is set in stark contrast to our former condition of being **“dead”** in trespasses and sins. The sinner is not biologically dead. Indeed the natural man is very much alive. Corpses do not sin. The death in view here is clearly spiritual death.

Paul speaks of the dead walking. They walk according to a certain course, which the apostle calls the course of this world. This path is diametrically opposed to the course or way of heaven. To take this path is to walk according to the prince of this world. Paul is obviously referring to Satan, so in our natural condition we are willing disciples of Satan. To be spiritually dead is to be diabolically alive.

In our former condition we willingly fulfilled the lusts of the flesh and the mind, behaving like creatures who are **(because of original sin)** by nature children of wrath. When Paul says we are children of wrath **“by nature,”** he plunges a stake in the heart of Pelagianism. In this passage he provides a grim and graphic portrait of the natural man.

To be dead in sin is to be in a state of moral and spiritual bondage. By nature we are slaves to sin. This does not mean that the fall has destroyed or eradicated the human will. Fallen man still has all the faculties to make choices. We still have a mind and a will. The problem is not that we cannot make choices. Natural men make choices all the time. The problem is that, in our fallen condition, we make sinful choices. We make these choices freely. We sin precisely because we want to sin, and we are capable of choosing exactly what we want to choose.

Where then is the locus of our inability? The confes-

sion says that natural man is unable **“to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”** If we still have a will, why are we unable to convert ourselves or even prepare ourselves for conversion? The simple answer is this: because we do not want to. We have no desire for the righteousness of God, and free choice, by definition, involves choosing what we desire.

## FREE WILL

In one sense it is because our wills are free that we are in a state of moral inability. The thorny matter of free will is tied to the way our will functions. In his debate with **Pelagius**, **Augustine** insisted that fallen man retains a **free will (liberium arbitrium)**. He insisted, however, that via original sin man loses the **liberty (libertas)** he enjoyed prior to the fall.

On the surface it appears Augustine is playing word games. How can a person have a free will and not have liberty? This must be a distinction without a difference. The distinction, however, is both real and important. Man still has the ability to make choices, and in this sense he is free. But he lacks the capacity to exercise what Scripture calls **“royal freedom,”** a liberty for spiritual obedience.

**Calvin** took a position similar to **Augustine’s**: **“This liberty is compatible with our being depraved, the servants of sin, able to do nothing but sin. In this way, then, man is said to have free will, not because he has a free choice of good and evil, but because he acts voluntarily, and not by compulsion. This is perfectly true: but why should so small a matter have been dignified with so proud a title? An admirable freedom! That man is not forced to be the servant of sin, while he is, however, **“ethelodoulos” (a voluntary slave);** his will being bound by the fetters of sin.”**<sup>5</sup>

Though Calvin affirmed that we are able to choose what we want, he regarded the term free will a bit grandiose for the matter. **“Why should so small a matter,”** he asked, **“have been dignified with so proud a title?”** The title is indeed rooted in human pride. We like to think we have more moral power than we do.

We think our will is utterly unaffected by origi-

nal sin. This is the cardinal point of humanism. The humanistic and pagan view of free will is that the will acts from a posture of indifference. By indifference we mean that the will is inclined to neither good nor evil but exists in a state of moral neutrality. The mind of fallen man has no bias, no predisposition to evil. This view of free will is on a collision course with the biblical view of sin.

**Jonathan Edwards** defined the will as **“the mind choosing.”** Edwards did not deny that there is a meaningful distinction between the mind and the will. They are distinct faculties. Although the mind and the will may be distinguished from each other, they may not be separated from each other. Moral actions involve rational choices. A mindless choice is not a moral choice. Plants may incline their roots toward water by a series of physical causes. But we do not judge this movement in terms of virtue or vice.

These actions are involuntary. We also participate in involuntary actions. We do not decide to have our hearts pump blood through our circulatory system. This is an involuntary action. The brain may be involved in this process from a physiological vantage point, but not from the vantage point of conscious decision.

When **Edwards** spoke of the will as **“the mind choosing,”** he meant that we make choices according to what we deem preferable in terms of the options before us. **Edwards** concluded that we always choose according to the inclination that is strongest at the moment. This is a crucial insight into the will. It means that every choice we make has an antecedent cause. Our choices are not **“spontaneous,”** arising out of nothing. There is a reason for every choice we make. In a narrow sense every choice we make is determined.

To say that our choices are **“determined”** sounds very much like determinism. Determinism, however, means that our choices are controlled by external forces. This results in some form of coercion, which cancels out free choice. What **Edwards** had in mind is something different. Our choices are determined in the sense that they have a cause. This cause is the inclination of our will. This is self-determination, which is the very essence of free will. If I determine what I choose, this is not determinism, but it is a kind of determination. When we feel strongly about doing something, we may exclaim, **“I am determined to do this.”** This refers to a strong desire or inclination of the will to move in a cer-

tain direction.

When **Edwards** says that we always choose according to our strongest inclination at the moment, he means not only that we may choose what we most want at the moment, but that we must choose it. Indeed, this is exactly how we make choices. Try to think of a choice you have made that was not in accord with your strongest inclination at the time. We sometimes get confused about this because we are assaulted with a wide variety of inclinations, and they change in intensity from time to time.

For example, after we have finished a heavy meal, it is easy to decide to go on a diet. With full stomachs we resolve to reduce our calorie intake. After a few hours, however, we become hungry again and the desire for food intensifies. If we reach the point that we want to eat some pie more than we want to lose weight, we choose the pie over the diet. All things being equal, we may want to shed excess weight. We have a real desire to be thin. But that desire or inclination runs up against our desire for culinary pleasures. The problem is that all things do not stay equal.

Another example may be seen in a Jack Benny skit. Benny was confronted by a robber who said to him, "Your money or your life." Benny stood there mute, with a contemplative look on his face. Growing impatient the robber said, "Well, which is it, your money or your life?" "I'm thinking," Benny replied. "I'm thinking."

This story emphasizes that things are not always equal when we make choices. The robber reduces his victim's options to two: money or life. All things being equal, the victim has no desire to donate his money the robber.

Once death is threatened, however, the desire levels change. The victim has a greater desire to continue living than to keep his wallet, so he hands over his money. To be sure there is an element of coercion in this scenario, but the coercion is not absolute. It is extreme, but not final. The choice is still there to pay or die. A person may have such strong feelings against robbery that he prefers to die. He may cry, "**Give me liberty or give me death,**" but he knows that even if he dies as a martyr to his cause, the robber will still take his money.

The point of this illustration is that we choose according to our strongest inclination at the moment. We must understand this as we seek to grow in our obedience to God. Every time I sin, I do so because at the moment I prefer the sin to obedience. I may have a real desire in my heart to be obedient, but this desire runs into conflict with my sinful desires.

This is the dilemma expressed by the Apostle Paul:

**Romans 7:15-19 (NASB)**

**<sup>15</sup> For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.**

**<sup>16</sup> But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.**

**<sup>17</sup> So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.**

**<sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.**

**<sup>19</sup> For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.**

Paul is describing the conflict we face between rival inclinations, those toward the good and those toward evil. "**The good that I will to do,**" he says, "**I do not do.**" This does not undercut **Edwards's** view that we choose according to the strongest inclination. Christians do have a desire or will to do good. But we do not always do that good. At times we give in to our desire for evil. We do not do what we will to do because we do not will to do the good with sufficient intensity or strength. The whole process of sanctification involves this struggle. Paul likens it to warfare, a titanic battle between the spirit and the flesh.

The struggle between the spirit and the flesh is the struggle of the regenerate person. The unregenerate, natural man has no such struggle. He is in bondage to sin, acting according to the flesh, living according to the flesh, and choosing according to the flesh. He chooses according to the inclination that is dominant at the moment, and this inclination is never a desire to honor God out of a natural love for him. The desires of the unregenerate are wicked continuously. This is the bondage or spiritual death with which the doctrine of original sin is concerned.

## NATURAL ABILITY

**Edwards** makes another important distinction, one between natural ability and moral ability. Natural ability is provided to a creature by the Creator. For example, birds have the natural ability to fly through the air without the aid of machines; human beings do not. Like fish, we have the natural ability to swim in the sea. Unlike fish, we cannot live in the sea without the aid of artificial equipment. God provides gills and fins for fish, feathers and wings for birds, but he has not endowed us with such equipment.

We human beings do have the natural ability, however, to make choices. We have been given the necessary natural equipment. We have a mind that can process information and understand the obligations imposed by the law of God. We have a will that enables us to choose to do what we want to do. Prior to the fall we also had a good inclination, enabling us to choose the good. It is precisely this inclination to the good that was lost in the fall. Original sin does not destroy our humanity or our ability to make choices. The natural ability or faculty remains intact.

What was lost is the good inclination or righteous desire for obedience. The unregenerate person is not inclined to obey God. He has no love for God that stirs his will to choose God. He could choose the things of God if he wanted them, but he does not want them. Our wills are such that we cannot freely choose what we have no desire to choose. The fundamental loss of a desire for God is the heart of original sin.

The lack of desire for the things of God renders us morally unable to choose the good. This is what **Edwards** means when he distinguishes between natural ability and moral ability. Fallen man has the natural ability to choose God (the necessary faculties of choice), but he lacks the moral ability to do so.

The ability to make righteous moral choices requires righteous desires and inclinations. Without a righteous inclination to the good, no one can choose the good. Our choices follow our inclinations. For man to be able to choose the things of God, he must

first be inclined to choose them. Since the flesh makes no provision for the things of God, grace is required for us to be able to choose them.

The unregenerate person must be regenerated before he has any desire for God. The spiritually dead must first be **made alive** (“**quicken**ed”) by the Holy Spirit before they have any desire for God.

### **John 6:63-68 (NASB)**

<sup>63</sup> " [Jesus said,] **It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.**

<sup>64</sup> "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.

<sup>65</sup> And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

<sup>66</sup> As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.

<sup>67</sup> So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?"

<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.

On this occasion Jesus spoke about the moral impotence of the flesh. He taught his disciples that the flesh “**profits nothing.**” Perhaps his most startling comment is this: “**No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.**” This statement is a universal negative proposition. It states a universal inability. The word can does not describe permission, but power or ability. To say no one can do something is to say they are unable to do it.

The stark truth expressed by Jesus is that no person has the ability to come to Christ on his or her own. For a person to be able to come to Christ, it must first be granted or “given” to that person to come to Christ. God must do something for us to overcome our moral inability to come to Christ. We cannot embrace Christ in the flesh. Without the aid of the Holy Spirit, we cannot come to Christ.

**Jesus’ statement about our natural inability to come to him is a strong and radical one. It is as strong as the position taken by Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Edwards.** Indeed these theologians were

heavily influenced by these words of Christ. His audience reacted strongly to Jesus' teaching: many of his followers left him. I suppose they left to join the ranks of the Pelagians of that day.

Baptist theologian **Roger Nicole** once remarked, **"We are all by nature Pelagians."** We tend to think in Pelagian categories and find it difficult to escape them. Even conversion to Christ does not instantly cure us of this tendency. **Pelagianism remains alive and well in the evangelical house.**

Because of our depravity and the effects of original sin, we find liberation only by the grace of God. **The Westminster Confession** says this:

"When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil. The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only."<sup>6</sup>

The confession understands that a person who is inclined in only one direction, whether to the good or to the evil, is still free in a certain sense. This freedom is real. For example, God is totally free, yet he is morally unable to sin. This inability is rooted in his character, his internal righteousness by which he never desires or is inclined to sin.

He is free, but free only for goodness. This lack of desire for evil does not diminish God's freedom; it enhances it.

Likewise, in our glorified state in heaven we will be unable to sin because all desire for sin and all remnants of original sin will be removed from us. We will still be free to choose what we want, but we will choose only the good because this is the only thing we will desire. This is the freedom Augustine referred to as liberty in the ultimate degree.

### **Humanity's Radical Corruption**

1. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. James Millar (1898; reprint, New York: Dover, 1961), pp. 168-69. From Augustine, *On the Gift of Persever-*

ance (A.D. 428), 53.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:214 (2.1.5).

3. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3:1300-1301.

4. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 9.3.

5. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:228-29 (2.2.6-7).

6. The Westminster Confession, 9.4-5.

## **CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)**

To ascertain how sin, which involves all men, came into the world is a matter of no little importance. To discover why it is that all men universally and continually are unrighteous and ailing creatures supplies the key to many a problem. Look at human nature as it now is: depraved, wretched, subject to death. Ask philosophy to account for this, and it cannot do so. None can deny the fact that men are what they ought not to be, but how they became so human, wisdom is unable to tell us. To attribute our troubles to heredity and environment is an evasion; for it leaves unanswered the question how did it come about that our original ancestors and environment were such as to produce what now exists? Look not only at our prisons, hospitals and cemeteries, but also at the antipathy between the righteous and the wicked, between those who fear God and those who do not fear Him. The antagonism between Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, is repeatedly duplicated in every age and area; but the Bible alone traces that antagonism to its fountainhead. **1**

1. Pink, A. W. (2005). *Gleanings in the Scriptures: Man's Total Depravity* (14).





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There are two major types of passages in Hebrews – (1) those passages that deal with the exaltation of Christ, and (2) those passages that are exhortations. They are meticulously “interwoven” and cannot be divorced from one another. The writer continually exalts Christ in a way that almost demands both encouragements and warnings to follow. It is because of who Christ is that the readers are so passionately exhorted to persevere in faithfulness, and it is this fervent appeal (often communicated in the form of a warning) that has produced the theological tension in the letter.

The pattern of Hebrews is that the writer has often interspersed the exhortations within the doctrinal teachings on Christ, which is somewhat different from many of the New Testament letters which present the doctrine first, then present the exhortations. One of the reasons why the writer probably intermingled the doctrine and the exhortations (which is perfectly okay) was to help the reader with the warnings. The warnings present the most difficult portions of the book. By contrast, the exaltations of Christ are the richest and most honoring found anywhere in the New Testament. The truth of the mat-

ter, however, is that the exaltations and the warnings simply cannot be divorced from one another. Just imagine for a moment how the book would read if the author presented all of the doctrine first, which would probably compose anywhere from 8-10 chapters, and then simply presented the warnings. If he had approached the letter that way, then most likely his readers (who were already experiencing some very difficult circumstances) would have probably felt spiritually overwhelmed. If the warnings had all been consolidated, then in all likelihood they may have seemed more as a threat. However, the author took a different approach. He presents a picture of Christ and then gives a warning. The exaltations of Christ simply provide a glorious background for the author’s strong encouragement. And as mentioned in the first introductory study, the warnings when fully understood should actually be a great encouragement for every true believer because they know that the thrust of the warnings do not reflect their life or lifestyle. Rather than being a source of discouragement, they become a source of great encouragement.

Someone may say “But what if they do describe my life and how I actually live?” Then the simple response would be that they need to heed the warning and the instruction that follows. Anyone who loves someone will always warn them of the inherent dangers that they know may exist for their life and then encourage them to heed the warnings they have been given. A couple of years ago one of the families in my church went to a particular beach for a vacation. That beach has a reputation for a very powerful undertow called a “rip-tide”, and unfortunately one of their young daughters got caught in the very powerful, but unseen undertow. She was no match for the undertow and nearly drowned in her struggle to get back to shore. Two members of the family literally risked their lives in going out to make her rescue. It can be guaranteed that if some of their friends or family go with them on their next trip to this beach that they will surely share the warning about the undertow before anyone ever gets into the water. The biblical warnings are the believer’s friend. They are not there to harm, but to help, protect, and encourage.

It should be recognized that even though the gospel

calls on the unbeliever to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved, that once saved it then calls on that believer to persevere in their faith. The issue is really very simple. It is essential that our behavior matches what the gospel requires of those who believe. Everyone has reasonable and legitimate expectations of other people who serve in various capacities. For instance, if a policeman stopped you for speeding, but he was so drunk that he could barely write out a ticket, then you would find that difficult to accept. Why? It is simply because the policeman's behavior was not consistent with who and what he was and what he represented. His behavior did not match his job description. How would a parent feel if their child's school teacher was cursing at their children and treating them harshly? They would most likely seek to have them dismissed. Why? Because the teacher's behavior did not match their position. Everyone who has a job is normally given a job description that clearly explains their duties, responsibilities, and the expectations associated with the job. And if those duties and obligations are not fulfilled, then the employer has every right to terminate someone's employment. Expectations are a normal part of life, and they should be.

So, why should God's expectations of His children be any different? Why should someone ever feel that God is unfair or unreasonable because He desires that His children's behavior and life match who they claim to be? As a pastor, I represent the church that I serve. I am an official representative of my church, and the members rightfully have expectations of how I am to conduct myself around other people. They would be deeply embarrassed, highly disappointed, and grieved if they heard that I acted unbecomingly – that I cursed, watched X-rated movies, gossiped, treated people harshly, was a sluggard and a liar, and that I was a drunkard. Any one of those and any combination of those would certainly disqualify me from the pastorate. Every member has legitimate spiritual expectations of me as their pastor. So, what can be discerned so far is that both the admonitions and the warnings function as a necessary means for believers to persevere in their salvation.

Obviously, there is much to gain or lose by not heeding the warnings. For the believer, it is not a loss of salvation that is in focus here, but a loss of rewards. The warnings serve as a scriptural way of

identifying the reality and genuineness of a person's confession of Christ. As a part of the privilege of being a follower of Christ are specific associated responsibilities that go along with the privilege. Scripture has provided the believer with specific guidelines on how God's expectations of our life should be lived out. The warnings and admonitions that God has given are one of the means that He uses to elicit a faithfulness that corresponds to the believer's heavenly calling. And what will be discerned as we make our way through Hebrews is that someone's personal assurance of salvation is normally directly linked to how well they persevere in running the race. For those believers who do not take God's scriptural calling on their life seriously and who live in a way that is unbecoming to Christ, they will find that they are always doubting their salvation and generally have no meaningful assurance. A lack of assurance is very often a direct by-product of an ungodly lifestyle. Paul talked about the relationship between his behavior and his assurance in [II Timothy 4:7-8](#).

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.**

Paul's words reveal that there is a direct connection between his life and his assurance. There is "**fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith**" on one side, and a "**crown of righteousness**" on the other. Paul was extremely confident that he had lived his life in such a way that it exalted Christ and would have meaningful rewards.

A problem that many Christians seem to have is that they only think of salvation in the past tense, or i.e., they were "saved" (past tense). However, the New Testament does not stop there. Salvation is portrayed as being three-fold – we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will finally be saved. And all three aspects are important and vital to a meaningful and biblical definition of salvation. There are many individuals who claim salvation, but who have no perseverance relative to the things of God and who do not live in a manner that exalts Christ. These are people who have only embraced the past tense of salvation, but have not embraced the present and future aspect of salvation. If that



occurs, then what has happened is a forfeiting of a crucial element of biblical teaching that has practical consequences of great importance and significance.

There is a grave danger of misunderstanding Hebrews if a parallel treatise on the matter of Christian perseverance, diligence, and assurance is not included. Look carefully at how the author states this in [Hebrews 6:10-12](#),

**<sup>10</sup>For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. <sup>11</sup>And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, <sup>12</sup>that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience (longsuffering/endurance/perseverance) inherit the promises.**

[Hebrews 10:36](#) says,

**<sup>36</sup>For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.**

[Hebrews 12:1](#) reiterates more of the same,

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.**

Often the issues of perseverance and assurance are viewed by many as not being compatible and able to co-exist. This is really very critical to the exposition of Hebrews because what is ultimately at stake is the doctrine of eternal security. It must be understood that there is no conflict between the perseverance of the Christian in their faith and the issue of eternal security. All of those who truly belong to Christ will persevere until the end and they are eternally secure. Christians should always be encouraged to persevere in their faithfulness to Christ while at the same time be encouraged to lay hold of the eternal life and bold assurance that is the hallmark of genuine salvation. It is not that the two cannot co-exist, but the simple fact that they must.

There are many systems of theology that deny the doctrine of eternal security. But what would be the point of the author continually presenting Christ and talking about how glorious and magnificent Christ is if in reality His sacrifice and His work were not really sufficient to eternally save? Because the warnings and conditional statements are in the Bible, it must be understood that they are appropriate and necessary. They are not there to frighten, but to encourage and to admonish. These Hebrew believers were going through enormous trials and struggles, and what the writer is ultimately saying to them is simple: “Since you are of God’s house and a part of God’s family, you are the house that God is building. And that necessitates that you stand firm in your faith.” Once again, there is absolutely no conflict between the teaching that all true believers are forever secure and safe in Christ and the parallel teaching that emphasizes that all true believers must persevere in the faith. True biblical faith is proved by steadfastness under trials. Every employer has legitimate expectations of their employees. Every parent has legitimate expectations of their children. And in like manner, God has legitimate expectations of His children. Courage comes from knowing, and knowing comes from Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. God’s saving work is absolutely sure and it is that assurance that provides the boldness and courage needed to face life’s trials.

In reality, it would be spiritually damning on our part to try and convince someone that they were saved simply because they made a “decision”, but had never exemplified any corresponding or ongoing biblical fruit in their life. Yet that is exactly what many segments of the church have done. They have given false assurance to people who have never demonstrated any kind of meaningful transformation in their life. The issue is whether or not a person’s life actually reflects what the Scriptures reveal is the true nature and character of biblical salvation.

There is a very biblical reason why true believers persevere in their Christian faith. It is because of God! It is because God in His grace and sovereignty is deeply at work in the true follower of Christ. He is the One who gives them grace – both the desire and the power to do His will, as well as the deep desire to remain faithful to Him. Think about that for just a moment. Think about your own personal desire to be faithful to Christ. Cer-

tainly it is not just a by-product of personal resolve and determination, but rather a reflection of a much deeper and continuing work of God within your life. The Holy Spirit has been faithfully building you up in your faith and in your faithfulness. Even though God will not live the Christian life for us, it is just as important to understand that we cannot live the Christian life without Him. Sanctification is that one aspect of our salvation that is a joint effort – God’s work and our response to that work. The genuine believer will persevere until the end because God has chosen for them to do so. That is the guarantee of God for those He has chosen. He will not lose one! Each believer is one of God’s elect, one who has been divinely ordained to be a part of God’s family – and they will persevere until the end.

Now, within Hebrews there are approximately sixteen (16) specific passages given to exalting Christ, and to complement that there are over forty (40) specific exhortations associated with those exaltations, and that does not include the five (5) major warnings. Of the thirteen (13) chapters in Hebrews, eleven (11) have detailed passages that speak specifically about Christ and His priesthood. To complement the exaltations, there is a prevailing influence of the temple and the priesthood throughout. It is the author’s approach to integrating the Old Testament with the New Testament simply because the Old Testament is all these believers had ever known. He talks about the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly sanctuary, and about the earthly priests and the great heavenly High Priest. The letter is profoundly engaged with the holiness of God and with the concept of the Christian life as worship. In fact, when the arrangement of the temple is clearly understood, what is discovered is that everything in the Holy Place was designed to provoke a heartfelt worship of God, and everything in the Holy of Holies was designed to provoke a deep and abiding reverence for the holiness of God. Both places were sacred and both were critical to the life of the Hebrew people.

So, there are many issues related to the book of Hebrews, but none more important than the exalted presentation of Christ. The following are just several selected passages that deal with the exaltation of His person and they are passages that should be a great encouragement to the believer to yield their life to

Christ in fervent and committed worship. The objective is to simply preview what is one of the overall purposes of the letter which is to exalt Christ from beginning to end.

### Hebrews 1 (v1-4 only)

**<sup>1</sup>God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; <sup>3</sup>who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.**

This passage states that God’s supreme revelation is in Christ. **Whatever God desires for the believer to know about Himself is found exclusively in the person of Christ**. It speaks of the superiority of Christ, of the pre-eminence of Christ, and that Christ is superior to the angels. He is better than anything and everything that has preceded Him. In v2-3 there are seven (7) different characteristics spoken about Christ, about His person, and about His pre-eminence as God. And when someone confesses that Jesus is Lord, those seven (7) characteristics are what they are proclaiming and attesting to in their life. Without Christ there is no salvation, no hope, and no future. He is the pinnacle of everything that God has done. He is the perfect Saviour, the perfect Sacrifice, and the perfect High Priest. In v8, He is called “God” and it says that His throne is forever and ever. In v10, it says that He was the One who laid the foundation of the earth, and that the heavens are the work of His hands. In v13, it states that He is sitting at the right hand of God. There is no one to whom He can be compared. This is what Hebrews is about and Hebrews 1 makes that perfectly clear.

Also, there are seven specific quotations from the Old Testament in Hebrews 1. There is no other place in all

of the New Testament where there is such a consolidated array of Scriptures exalting the Person of Christ as there are in Hebrews 1. This is one of the highest of all praises and clearly reveals that Jesus Christ is the very essence of God and the perfect revelation of His character and nature. God has now completed His revelation of Himself and He has accomplished that in the God-Man Jesus Christ. He is defined as the Creator and as being Eternal. He is seen as radiant in His glory, and the One for whom all things exist. The early church was overwhelmed and saturated with the Person of Christ, and whenever any church loses its sense of awe and wonder for who Christ is and what He has done, immediately they will begin to spiritually atrophy and wither.

The very last thing that a true follower of Christ would ever want to do is to somehow lose sight of the transforming power that saturates and permeates the person of Christ. It is very distressing that many in the modern day church seem so underwhelmed with Christ and so indifferent to His Being. In many cases it almost seems that a transforming enthusiasm for Christ is seen as being beneath the sophisticated disciple. On the other hand, history has shown that when the church rediscovers this magnificent Christ and becomes overwhelmed with Him that it literally sweeps entire epochs of history with it. Hebrews has to be one of the most critical letters of the New Testament for the church to rediscover because the church needs to be smitten with the glory and Person of Christ. Nothing can be added to Him, and may God help us not to take anything away.

#### **Hebrews 4:14-15**

**<sup>14</sup>Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**

**<sup>15</sup>For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.**

This passage speaks of Christ's ascension and says that He was tempted, yet without sin. It speaks of Him as our Great High Priest. V14 is the picture of the ascension of Christ into heaven, yet it connects it to His being our High Priest. Once a year, the high

priest would pass from the sight of the people into the Holy of Holies bearing the sacrificial blood for the atonement of the people's sins. The contrast here is that Christ did this once for all when He ascended into heaven itself and offered His blood in the heavenly Holy of Holies, or in the very presence of God. All of the types and symbols of the Old Testament are simply a picture of what is actually taking place in heaven itself. This verse is a good example of that.

Once a year on the Day of Atonement the high priest, who was representing all of the people, would enter the Holy of Holies in the temple where he would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. This was a symbolic way of atoning for the sins of the people. What is interesting about this, however, is that he had to enter into the Holy of Holies through three (3) different doors. First, he would take the blood through the first door into the outer court. Secondly, he would take the blood through the second door into the Holy Place. And then thirdly, he would take the blood through the actual veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. After Jesus our great high priest had made his sacrifice on the cross, it says here that He "**passed through the heavens**". This is a picture of what happened in the earthly temple on the Day of Atonement. Christ went through the first heaven, or the atmosphere. Then He passed through the second heaven, or what is called outer space. And then He entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies which was the very throne room of God in the third heaven. This was the most holy of all places. And it was there that Christ presented His blood to the Father where it was fully accepted and then Christ sat down – something that no earthly priest had ever done while serving in the temple. There were no seats in the temple simply because the work was never finished, but now the redemptive work of Christ had been completed and He sat down at the right hand of God.

#### **Hebrews 6:19-20**

**<sup>19</sup>This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, <sup>20</sup>where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.**

This passage once again states that Christ has entered into God's presence and has become our "**High Priest**

**forever**". It is the word "**forever**" that should capture our attention. When Christ entered into heaven to offer His atoning blood in the presence of God the Father, He entered as the "**forerunner**". This is the only place this particular word is used in the New Testament. When used figuratively as it is here, it does not simply mean that Jesus ran ahead of us. Rather, He is the precursor, the predecessor for what is to follow. He is the first in a series that follows after Him. He is the One Who has opened up the way behind the veil and in the presence of God. He is the one who has entered the heavenly sanctuary to obtain our cleansing. [Hebrews 9:12](#) says it this way,

**<sup>12</sup>Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.**

He has entered into the Presence of God to represent us, to take our place. [Hebrews 9:24](#) says,

**<sup>24</sup>For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;**

It is the fact that He has entered into the heavenly sanctuary as the forerunner than enables every believer to enter. [Hebrews 10:19-20](#) says,

**<sup>19</sup>Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,**

There is a reason that we are encouraged to approach our heavenly Father with confidence. It is because Christ has approached God for us and He offered to God the Father the perfect sacrifice – His own precious blood. And He is there at the right hand of God forever interceding on our behalf. He will always be there interceding for us. He will always be our great High Priest. His atoning sacrifice will always be acceptable to God the Father. And for those reasons, we have been made accepted in the Beloved.

All of the exaltation passages are designed to magnify Christ in such a way that His importance, worth, and

significance are greatly enhanced. The connection in both a negative sense and a positive sense is that **the less a believer thinks of Christ, the less they will live for Him, and the more they think of Christ, the more they will live for Him.** If someone is not living for Christ, then they do not think too much of Christ. Jesus spoke about this in [Matthew 16:13-17](#) ,

**<sup>13</sup>When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" <sup>14</sup>So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup>He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup>Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.**

The questions at this point to each of us are simple. Who do we think Christ is? Do we really and truly believe that He is "**the Christ, the Son of the living God**"? And if we do, does our life reflect that belief? That is the acid test of what someone says that they believe. If someone's life does not reflect their confession, then their confession is superficial and deeply flawed. So, one of the purposes of these exaltations of Christ is to help reveal what someone really thinks about Christ. For someone who has only made a verbal profession of Christ, but has not really embraced Christ in genuine faith and commitment, these passages will be boring to them. Why? It is because Christ is not significant to them. However, for the genuine believer who has truly embraced Christ, these passages will have deep significance and substance for them. That is what these passages are designed to do – to elicit worship and adoration that helps the believer to live out the subsequent exhortations and admonitions of Hebrews, and to do so with great confidence.

[Hebrews 7:22](#)

**<sup>22</sup>by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.**

This passage says that Christ has become “**a surety of a better covenant**”. The word “**surety**” means that Christ is our “**guarantee**” (NIV, NASB, AMP). In fact, this is the only place that this word is used in the New Testament. What this means is that if someone has come to Christ for salvation, then they have a guarantee of that salvation. They have someone who has physically offered His blood for their sins and is now reigning in heaven at the right hand of God to insure that their salvation is brought to its final and ultimate completion. When someone becomes a “**surety**” for someone else, it means that they have legally assumed responsibility for another person’s debt if that individual cannot meet payment of their debt. They are accepting the legal obligations associated with a debt. So Christ has assumed responsibility to pay the spiritual debt that we cannot pay. Christ has purchased an “eternal” guarantee that He will bring every genuine believer into the fullness of the salvation that He has called them to and given to them, and He has made a new “**covenant**” for them. Christ Himself is our security, our assurance, and our guarantee that God will keep His promise of giving each believer eternal life, and that likewise He will ensure that they will persevere to the very end and be preserved blameless as they are presented at His throne. This is amazing!

This also is the first use of the word “**covenant**” in this letter, but it is further developed beginning in [Hebrews 8:6](#) forward. It is a crucial theological term and is developed more in Hebrews than any other New Testament book. This “**covenant**” is how God further manifests His love to believers after the cross. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ were the greatest manifestations of His love, but since that event has passed, this “**covenant**” becomes how He actually incorporates the benefits of the cross into the believer’s life. It could be said that it is the “legal” means by which God actually imparts His grace to the believer. I.e., God has made a promise (covenant) and He will keep that promise. And the way that God spiritually effects that promise in the believer’s life is through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There are three (3) passages that confirm this. [II Corinthians 1:21-22](#) says,

**<sup>21</sup>Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, <sup>22</sup>who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.**

[II Corinthians 5:5](#) says,

**<sup>5</sup>Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.**

[Ephesians 1:13-14](#) says,

**<sup>13</sup>In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, <sup>14</sup>who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.**

In a sense, this is a two-fold guarantee. Right now, since Christ cannot be physically seen or known, the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence is the means by which we can personally know that we are truly saved. The Holy Spirit is our present “**guarantee**”. He is at work in our life – compelling, leading, teaching, helping, convicting, and exalting Christ to us. That is what the Holy Spirit does, and if we know that He is doing these things in our life, then that becomes one of God’s primary means of giving assurance to the believer – this indwelling and manifesting presence of the Holy Spirit. When we are actually in God’s presence, then we will see our Great High Priest the Lord Jesus Christ sitting at the right hand of God the Father and we will know beyond any shadow of a doubt that our salvation is utterly and eternally secure.

Once God makes a promise, His character will not allow Him to break that promise in any way. A promise is no better than the one making the promise, and since God is the One making this promise, it is guaranteed – and He has demonstrated that guarantee through the sacrifice of His Son and the giving of the Holy Spirit to every believer.

[Hebrews 7:24-28](#)

**<sup>24</sup>But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. <sup>25</sup>Therefore He is also**

**able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. <sup>26</sup>For such a High Priest was fitting for us, *who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; <sup>27</sup>who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. <sup>28</sup>For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.***

This passage says that Christ has an “**unchangeable priesthood**”, that He is “**able to save to the uttermost**”, that He makes “**intercession**” for believers, and that He has “**offered up Himself**” as their sacrifice. It is important to appreciate what the author is doing through his continual exaltations of Christ. His primary purpose is to demonstrate the spiritual and eternal advantages that a believer has because of Christ. What a tragedy it becomes for a believer to not recognize what Christ has actually accomplished for them. What a tragedy for them to always be agonizing about how they can keep themselves saved. Generally, this is simply because they do not appreciate who Christ is or what He has done for them.

Just think for a moment about the predicament of an unbeliever. He has unknowingly being deceived and tricked out of eternal life for something temporary and of no value. Satan offers him no advantages, no benefits, and no value. In the end, he finds himself face to face with God at the Great White Throne Judgment with absolutely no one to help him, no one to plead his case, and absolutely no one to rescue him. He is in the very worst of all conditions, and he finds himself utterly helpless. Everything that he had placed his confidence in and all of his personal ideas about life and eternity are now utterly and completely worthless. They have no saving power and he finds himself in a situation from which there is no escape. It is the worst of all scenarios. In fact, a detailed study of the word “**salvation**” indicates that it denotes that someone is “rescued” from danger. And when it is used in the Scriptures, it refers to believers having been rescued from both sin and God’s wrath. Christ rescued us from dying without salvation, but the un-

believer finds himself face to face with God and no one to help him. In fact, what he finds out is that he has been deceived so badly that the one he actually hated and despised, which was Christ, was the only One who could help him.

The term “**unchangeable priesthood**” means that Christ’s priestly work is permanent and absolute (NIV, NASB, ESV). It is something that cannot be shaken, removed, or changed. It is not that His priestly work will not be changed, but that it cannot be changed. It is not something that can be weakened or become ineffective. His priestly work on the believer’s behalf will never be diminished or reduced in any way. His requests to God the Father will always be heard and always answered as He requests. In the Old Testament, the priesthood was constantly changing. Priests would come and go. They would die and be replaced. And each one was different from the other. The people never knew if the high priest was going to be good or bad, concerned or indifferent, helpful or harmful. But not so with Christ. His priesthood and high priestly ministry on our behalf is permanent and unchanging. He is always the same. [Hebrews 13:8](#) says,

**<sup>8</sup>Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.**

The phrase “**able to save to the uttermost**” means that Christ is able to save His people completely and forever. The term “**uttermost**” carries with it two ideas – that of being complete and that of being eternal, or “**for all time**” (RSV). The Amplified Bible translates it best when it says,

**<sup>25</sup>Therefore He is able also to save to the uttermost (completely, perfectly, finally, and for all time and eternity) those who come to God through Him, since He is always living to make petition to God *and* intercede with Him *and* intervene for them.**

What this signifies is that there will never be one single moment where His saving power over our life and for our benefit is thwarted or interrupted. Nothing can disrupt His saving power, nothing can stop it, and nothing can sever the believer from Him. He can help anyone anytime with anything. “**He is able**” and everything that He is doing is designed to both bless and

protect those who have committed themselves to Him. There is great comfort in this truth.

When the writer says that “**He always lives to make intercession**” for us, he is saying that the power and ability of Christ to effectively act on behalf of His people is unlimited, unrestricted, and unrestrained. I.e., there is nothing that He cannot do for those who are His. Personally we had a dilemma. First of all we could not save ourselves, and secondly we cannot keep ourselves saved. Christ, however, can do both. He not only saves, but He keeps us saved. If Christ could only save someone initially, but not actually keep them saved eternally, it is not clear that He could even be called a Savior under those circumstances.

The word for “**intercession**” clearly refers to the fact that Christ approaches God the Father on the believer’s behalf. In fact, this has always been the primary function of a priest – to intercede on someone else’s behalf. [Hebrews 9:24](#) says this about what Christ has done,

**24For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;**

[Romans 8:34](#) repeats this truth,

**34Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.**

Also interspersed within the two major elements of the letter are seven (7) specific promises (there may be more based on how the reader defines a promise). These promises certainly do not represent the major message of Hebrews, but nonetheless they are an important element of the overall encouragement that the author is providing. One of the overall functions of the various promises of Scripture is that they serve as a major spiritual component for developing both assurance and confidence within a believer’s life and represent the ultimate incentive and reward for a godly life.

When addressing the various promises of Scripture, it must always be kept in mind that there are two kinds of promises – conditional promises and unconditional promises. An unconditional promise is one that is for the benefit of the believer, but is completely independent of them. The conditional promise is one that is for the benefit of the believer, but is dependent on their response to the promise. I.e., God will fulfill the promise **IF** the believer will fulfill their obligations related to the promise. What every believer is responsible to embrace is that maintaining a spiritual focus is something that must be appropriated for and applied to their life. It is something that is intentional, deliberate, calculated, planned, and purposeful. With a conditional promise, nothing is automatic. There are spiritual truths and realities that must first be understood and then appropriated in the believer’s life so they can spiritually function within their life. As simple examples, for instance, the Word of God will not benefit a believer if they never spend any time in it. A superficial believer will never find strength in the local church if they rarely attend. Likewise, prayer will remain a complete mystery if the believer never prays.

The first promise is a “conditional” promise found in [Hebrews 2:18](#) and states that Jesus Christ is able to “aid” or “help” those who are being tested in their life.

**18For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.**

The word for “tempted” (*peirazo*) means to test, to try, to prove. Zodhiates defines the meaning in the [Hebrews 2](#) context as God actually being the One who is testing the faith and confidence of the believer. However, because the verse indicates that Christ “**is able to aid**”, it is understood that the believer must make the effort to come to Christ for that help. So, the “condition” is that believers must avail themselves of the help that Christ can give. It appears from the context of the first part of [Hebrews 2](#) that the author is not just dealing with the everyday trials and temptations that every believer will normally face. Rather, what it appears that he is dealing with is this innate propensity and inclination that many often have to become disloyal to God and to simply abandon their Christian profession. The enemy is always at work against the believer

in this area, and some are simply more prone to discouragement, depression, and giving up than others.

What seems important to the writer is that right in the beginning of his letter he wants his readers to understand and appreciate that Jesus Christ is more than able to help them in whatever trials and difficulties that they may be experiencing. For these Hebrew Christians, they were being persecuted, socially rejected, physically assaulted, and economically deprived. These were no small issues for them, and in many cases had become a great source of discouragement. Christ is not some kind of mere onlooker or distant bystander who has very little interest in His family. The truth is that Jesus Christ is certainly more than able and more than willing to provide the specific help, comfort, and encouragement that a believer might need – no matter what the circumstance. He was personally tested to the very limit and remained utterly faithful. At this point in the letter, it is not apparent what the specific nature of the help that Christ offers actually is, or how it may be administered to the believer. [Hebrews 4:16](#) gives somewhat of a hint when it says,

**<sup>16</sup>Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

What is being clarified in this verse is that the “aid” that Christ gives is the very power of God working in the believer’s life. And that power is being supernaturally released in their life for those moments when they are tempted to forsake obedience, to deny Christ, or to simply give up their faith or faithfulness due to various temptations, difficulties, and danger. What the author is saying is that the supernatural power that Christ provides is what the believer needs to be able to withstand their trials so that they are not overcome by them. Every believer will need this power operating in their life at different times and in different measures, and it comes solely from Christ and nowhere else. The Christian must come to Christ for this kind of help. How is it administered? By grace. It may be strength that comes from something read in His Word. It may come directly as a supernatural endowment of spiritual strength given by the Holy Spirit. It may come from other believers as they come

alongside to help and encourage. The promise simply does not identify when or how the help will come, but it does clearly communicate that it will come. **Salvation is not something that Christ gives to us apart from Himself.** Salvation is Christ, salvation is in Christ, and salvation is through Christ. Strength, help, comfort, encouragement – they all come from Christ because they are all in Christ.

So, the first promise is that Jesus Christ will “aid” or “help” those who are being tested in their life **IF** they will simply come to Him for that help. Christ’s part is to help, the believer’s part is to come for that help.

The second major promise is also a “conditional” promise found in [Hebrews 4:9](#) and it speaks about a particular “rest” that awaits the believer.

**“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.**

The better translation of the verse would be that of the NIV, NASB, AMP, and ESV where the term “rest” is translated as “**Sabbath-rest**” (*sabbatismos*). It is actually a different Greek word than the normal word for “rest” (*katapausis*) as used in v8.

The context of [Hebrews 3:16 – 4:10](#) is that some “**would not enter His rest**” ([3:18](#)), that some “**have come short of it**” ([4:1](#)), that some “**shall not enter My rest**” ([3:11, 4:3, 4:5](#)), and that some “**did not enter because of disobedience**” ([4:6](#)). So, clearly some enter this particular rest and some do not enter into this rest. This is a very difficult passage to interpret, so for the moment we will only briefly define what it means. The normal term for “rest” (*katapausis*) has many different meanings – ceasing from work, freedom from what may worry someone, to lie down, to relax, confidently trusting someone, or to lean on. These are elements of God’s rest that every believer can and should enjoy in their lives all of the time. So, when the author speaks of the “**Sabbath-rest**” (*sabbatismos*), it includes all of these elements of rest, but it also refers to the ultimate and final rest that will be provided in the eternal state. From a practical standpoint, when a believer truly “enters” into God’s rest what it implies is that they have actually



believed God and believed His Word. They believe that He can be fully depended on for everything that they may need in their spiritual walk, and they have actually appropriated His truth into their life. However, [Hebrews 4:2](#) gives the problem that many believers seem to face,

**For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.**

The problem is simple – many believers hear the word, but for some it may never profit their life simply because they never combine and unite what they heard “**with faith**”. I.e., they never apply what they heard, and therefore they never enjoy the benefits and blessings of God’s spiritual rest in their life. They are always questioning the simple truths of Scripture as if their life is the apparent exception to what God has said. [Hebrews 4:11-12](#) simply says that what is needed is to be “**diligent to enter**” into God’s spiritual rest, and that is accomplished by letting the word of God which is “**living and powerful**” have its way in our life.

So, the second promise is that God has provided a supernatural and spiritual rest for every believer as they embrace God’s living and powerful Word in their lives.

The third promise is also a conditional promise, and it is found in [Hebrews 4:16](#) and says that God has mercy and grace to help the believer in the time of their need.

**Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

The word “**come**” (*proserchometha*) is a present subjunctive verb. That particular verb tense is used to state a possibility and stresses it as continuous action. So, it implies that the believer is to be continually coming to the throne of grace, rather than only coming when a particular need arises. The act of continually coming **is** the condition of the promise. In order to receive the mercy and grace that is

needed, the believer must actually come and keep coming to God for His help. For the Hebrew believers, their need for constant help was always imminent and often very urgent, and therefore they were encouraged to keep coming to God for the specific help that they needed. Unfortunately, believers are often inclined to not make this act of continually coming to God’s throne an ongoing discipline in their life, but rather something that is both sporadic and haphazard.

When read properly, this verse is a call to earnest and personal prayer, but one with a great promise. The “**throne of grace**” can be defined as the believer’s place of help. The “**throne of grace**” represents the place of God’s presence from which His grace emanates to His people. It is a place to which the believer must come. In the Old Testament the “**throne of grace**” was found in the Holy of Holies at the mercy seat, and the only person who was allowed to approach it was the high priest once a year. In the New Testament, however, the believer is called on to come to God’s throne with great confidence at any time. The present subjunctive tense of the verb “**come**” could be translated as “**let us again and again draw near to the throne of grace**”. So, when a believer does not allow time for earnest and believing prayer and communion with God, what they are saying is that they believe that they are able to cope with life’s problems and concerns without divine and supernatural help. In reality that is evidence of both spiritual arrogance and spiritual ignorance. In essence that individual is implying that even though they believe in God that they simply do not need Him except for dire emergencies. However, this entire letter from beginning to end urges the believer to continually enter into the presence of a God who deeply welcomes them into that presence.

In reality a believer may not really “feel” worthy of even calling on God. In many cases the reason is simply that they may have allowed sin to breach their spiritual life, and in the process the enemy spiritually assaults them with his ongoing condemnation. But the picture here is clearly not one of condemnation, but rather that of coming to a throne where grace and mercy prevails. It prevails simply because Christ is there interceding on the believer’s behalf. He is there as a faithful and merciful high priest who has entered the Holy of Holies in heaven itself. [Hebrews 8:1](#) declares,

**Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.**

Christ is there on behalf of every believer, and because of that, when the believer comes to God's throne in prayer and worship, they find mercy and not condemnation.

The meaning of the word "grace" refers to what is often called "sustaining grace". I.e., it is a grace that supports the believer, that helps them, one that strengthens and upholds them – but they must continually be coming to God for that help. What does not come out in the translation, however, is that the phrase "to help" means to run to assist someone's cry for help. It is a word that carries with it a sense of urgency and expediency on the part of the person that is coming to help. What an amazing picture of the heart of God the Father and of the heart of Christ.

So, the third promise is that God has mercy and grace to help every believer in their time of need.

The fourth promise is an unconditional promise, and is found in [Hebrews 6:10](#). It simply says that God will not forget the believer's "work and labor of love".

***<sup>10</sup>For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.***

Whatever a believer has done for Christ will not be forgotten. Unfortunately, not all Christian work is immediately fruitful or immediately rewarded, but even though it may be unnoticed by others, it is never unnoticed by God. Whatever a genuine believer has done solely for God's glory is eternally anchored in the heart of God and will be rewarded accordingly. [I Corinthians 15:58](#) says,

***<sup>58</sup>Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.***

The fifth promise is also an unconditional promise and is found in [Hebrews 6:17-19](#) where the writer states that the believer's "hope" is an "anchor of the soul" and is "both sure and steadfast".

***<sup>17</sup>Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, <sup>18</sup>that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup>This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil,***

Christians have this amazing "hope" and "strong consolation" for their life, but it is still something that they must "lay hold of". As the writer says here, it is a "refuge", and it is "both sure and steadfast". It is a paradox. This hope and this confidence is ours and is a mainstay of our inheritance, but it is still something that we must "lay hold of". That is why there is such a large exhortation in Hebrews 11 for the believer to live the Christian life "by faith".

The ESV and the Amplified translations use the term to "hold fast",

***<sup>18</sup> so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (ESV)***

***<sup>18</sup> This was so that, by two unchangeable things [His promise and His oath] in which it is impossible for God ever to prove false or deceive us, we who have fled [to Him] for refuge might have mighty indwelling strength and strong encouragement to grasp and hold fast the hope appointed for us and set before [us]. (AMP)***

We always have to appropriate what Christ has done for us. God is not going to live the Christian life for us. We have to live the Christian life, and we do so by applying these great truths of hope to our life.

The sixth promise is found in [Hebrews 7:25](#).

**<sup>25</sup>Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.**

The idea in the phrase “to save to the uttermost” is the idea that Jesus Christ is able to save completely and utterly. The NIV seems to translate it best when it states that “**He is able to save completely**”. The Amplified translates it as “**completely, perfectly, finally, and for all time and eternity**”. Whatever belongs to a believer’s entire and complete salvation, Jesus Christ is more than able to effect it and to accomplish it fully and completely. The word “**able**” comes from the Greek word “*dunamis*” and means to have the inherent ability to achieve whatever needs to be achieved. It is a word describing immense spiritual power and resources. The promise is that there is nothing associated with the full completion of the believer’s salvation that will not be ultimately secured for them. There is no enemy, no power, and no circumstance that can prevent Christ from bringing each believer fully and completely into His eternal presence. Every purpose and every objective that He has planned for the believer will be accomplished without any loss. No one and nothing will be lost or damaged. So, Christ not only has the power to save, but He also has the power to keep the believer saved – both presently and eternally.

The seventh and last promise is conditional and is found in [Hebrews 13:20-21](#),

**<sup>20</sup>Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, <sup>21</sup>make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.**

As the author arrives at end of his letter, he is offering His final encouragement to his readers. In some ways, simply because of what they were having to endure, it may have seemed to some that they had too many struggles and failures to be what God intended them to be and to accomplish what He want-

ed them to accomplish. The encouragement, however, is that God is the One who is working in them and doing what is well pleasing in His sight. The great promise and encouragement given in v21 is that very little depends on us personally. Obviously, every believer has great responsibilities and serious accountabilities relative to the Christian life simply because to whom much is given, much is required. But the truth of the matter is simply that a sovereign God will always accomplish what He has chosen to accomplish, and nothing can prevent that from happening.

The practical goal of the Christian life is to be obedient to God and to do those things that will be pleasing in His sight. However, the power to do either come directly from God. It would be utterly foolish on the believer’s part to think that the power for living the Christian life came from their personal resolve and determination. Personal spiritual growth and obedience are by God’s power and God’s grace working in the believer. Jesus said this in [John 5:19](#),

**<sup>19</sup>Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.”**

It was God the Father who perfected Christ’s earthly life and worked out a perfect salvation through Him. And likewise, God must perfect the believer in the same way that He worked in Christ. The phrase “**make you complete**” (v21) means to put into the right position and condition, to properly equip, and to fit something perfectly for its intended purpose. And that is exactly what God is doing in the believer - enabling them with His power and with His desires. It is a spiritual process that actually seeks to bring each believer into a state of utter dependence that just yields itself to God for whatever is needed. Every detail of a believer’s life is important. It must be remembered that with God nothing is small or insignificant. He desires to be in all that we do – small or great. This last promise is a great promise of what God is going to do in a Christian. He will perfect them and eventually bring their life to a place where the image of Christ has been fully perfected in them. What a great salvation is before us.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Schreiner, 11.
- <sup>2</sup>Schreiner, 16.
- <sup>3</sup>Schreiner, 40, 47.
- <sup>4</sup>Schreiner, 52.
- <sup>5</sup>Schreiner, 9-11.
- <sup>6</sup>Schreiner, 9-10.
- <sup>7</sup>Phillips, 89-90.
- <sup>8</sup>Schreiner, 12-13.
- <sup>9</sup>Manson, 1.
- <sup>10</sup>Evans, 62-63.
- <sup>11</sup>Evans, 63.
- <sup>12</sup>Hughes, 128-129.
- <sup>13</sup>O'Brien, 242.
- <sup>14</sup>Phillips, 246, 248.
- <sup>15</sup>O'Brien, 271.
- <sup>16</sup>Ellingworth, 386.
- <sup>17</sup>Owen, 177.
- <sup>18</sup>Schreiner, 48.
- <sup>19</sup>O'Brien, 273.
- <sup>20</sup>MacArthur, 198-199.
- <sup>21</sup>O'Brien, 273-274.
- <sup>22</sup>Hughes, 207.
- <sup>23</sup>Murray, 251-252.
- <sup>24</sup>Bruce, 173.
- <sup>25</sup>O'Brien, 275.
- <sup>26</sup>MacArthur, 201.
- <sup>27</sup>Brown, 70.
- <sup>28</sup>Vine's, 1128.
- <sup>29</sup>Zodhiates, 1135.
- <sup>30</sup>O'Brien, 123.
- <sup>31</sup>Owen, 51-52.
- <sup>32</sup>Murray, 102.
- <sup>33</sup>MacArthur, 96-97.
- <sup>34</sup>Lane, 115.
- <sup>35</sup>Brown, 96-97.
- <sup>36</sup>Owen, 112.
- <sup>37</sup>Owen, 177.
- <sup>38</sup>Allen, 628.
- <sup>39</sup>MacArthur, 451.
- <sup>40</sup>Murray, 542-543.

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