

JESUS
IS *Better*

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
FROM THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

MOUNTAIN BROOK BAPTIST CHURCH

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Introduction



Now that the first Sunday of Advent has passed, it's likely you are hard at work concentrating on your Christmas to-do list. Perhaps you've picked out and decorated the perfect tree. Maybe you're checking off boxes on your gift list for others. It's possible you're even planning to host your Sunday Morning Bible Study or small group party, and you're consumed with the details of a party menu, entertainment, and decor.

In the midst of this season when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, it can be easy to forget all about Him. In the hurry and in the rush, we hardly have a quiet moment to ourselves to marvel at the truth that in Christ, God has come to dwell with man. But Jesus is better. Jesus is better than the beautiful ornaments adorning that perfect Christmas tree. Jesus is better than any gift you could purchase for a loved one. Jesus is better than the best-planned party. Jesus is infinitely better than anything we bring in our humanity to this Christmas celebration.

“Jesus is better” is also the resounding message of the book of Hebrews. This letter—which sounds a lot like a sermon—was written by an unknown author to Jewish Christians. Sandwiched between the traditional epistolary greeting and ending greetings, we have chapter after chapter filled with exhortations and warnings, encouraging Christians to hold fast to the truth of the gospel—the truth that Jesus is better. Jesus is better than the Mosaic Covenant. Jesus is better than the sacrifices made by the high priests. Jesus is better than the food laws. Jesus is better than the temple. Jesus is even better than the angels!

This Advent and Christmas season, my prayer is that, in the midst of the hustle and bustle, we would slow down and hear the refrain of Hebrews over and over again in our heads, and that this truth—that Jesus is better—would translate to our hearts. After all, it's a truth we need to hear time and time again, and not just at Christmas. Jesus is better than any earthly desires we have. Jesus is better than our temporary circumstances. Jesus is better than worldly fame and security. Jesus is better than even all of the good gifts He may give us. To know Christ and to be known by Him is the greatest present of all. I pray you will know that true hope this Advent season.

Amy Hirsch

I Want to Be an Angel

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2 | HEBREWS 1:1-14 | DOUG DORTCH

One of the more important roles in the Christmas story is the one played by the angels. Who among us does not recall the part of the story where the heavenly hosts proclaim the good news of our Savior's birth? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men," they cry out to the Bethlehem shepherds (Luke 2:14 KJV). Moreover, you have Gabriel's appearance to both Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:11–37), as well as an angel's appearance to Joseph, husband of Mary, detailing God's purpose in Mary's pregnancy (Matthew 1:18–25). Angels indeed seem to be everywhere in the Christmas story, and everybody wants to play one when acting out the birth accounts.

But when we turn to the book of Hebrews, angels are assigned the "back seat." Why is that so?

More than likely, by the time the letter to the Hebrews was written, an "angel cult" had developed among early believers and had grown to the point that angels were threatening to diminish the role of Jesus in their worship. Consequently, the writer felt it urgent to remind his readers that as important as angels are to the gospel story, they are inferior to Christ and are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14 NIV). In other words, angels (whose name means "messengers") have been sent to watch over God's people who find themselves under constant persecution and tribulation in a world that is hostile to Jesus and His followers.

It may be that as we move into the Christmas season, you are finding it hard to gear up for the Advent promise of hope, peace, joy, and love. It may be that you have landed in a place that is more than you can handle, and you stand in need of a divine visitation that will funnel God's grace in a life-saving way.

I must say there have been plenty of those seasons in my life, and as I look back on them, I have seen on more than one occasion how God has sustained me, directed me, warned me, or encouraged me through the means of a divine presence that I have only realized after the fact. Was that presence an angel? I don't know about you, but I certainly have space in my system of belief for such a reality. But more times than not, the "ministering spirits [God] sent to serve" me came in the form of a family member, or a trusted friend, or a fellow church member—folk God sent to me through whom He might work to sustain me in my time of need. I believe these, too, were angels.

Our world today is groping and grasping for direction. In this special season of the year, people seem to be more open to someone who can help them find their way. I don't know that it's enough for us to believe in angels; I think it's far more important that we aspire to be like them as we point others to Jesus—God's Word that became flesh, the One whom God "appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe" (Hebrews 1:2 NIV).



Pay Attention

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3 | HEBREWS 2:1-4 | DOUG DORTCH

I am a daydreamer. I like to think that's because I'm a right-brained soul whose imagination tends to be charged up at all hours of the day. But I can't be content with patting myself on the back for that personality trait. After all, there's a downside to allowing my mind to wander from time to time—that downside being my tendency to lose focus on the urgent and important, some of which is right before me. Many times during the day, I have to “snap back” to reality and attend to that which I cannot afford to let slip by me.

I know I am not alone in that struggle. The book of Hebrews even warns against the perils of “drifting away” from that which gives us the assurance we need that God's hand is upon us. While later passages in Hebrews delve more deeply into this notion of “drifting away,” suffice it to say that in the theology of Hebrews, it is a matter against which we should be constantly on guard because of how we too easily lose our focus by attending to matters that make us oblivious to what God wants to do in and through us.

Such a drift comes at a cost we cannot afford. The “message spoken through angels” likely refers to the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai (Acts 7:38), which is how first-century Jews interpreted God's mediation to Moses. The writer's argument, therefore, is that the good news of Jesus Christ is superior to that angelic announcement and merits our most dedicated attention since it ultimately derived from the Holy Spirit's work in us (Hebrews 2:3–4).

This season of the year presents us with all manner of interruptions and distractions. As important as the parties and the gifts, the visits and the engagements all are, they carry a subtle inducement to allow our hearts and minds to “drift away” from that which holds the key to our every hope and dream.

Don't let that happen to you this Christmas season. Find a way in the midst of your busyness to keep in mind this “great salvation” God has made possible in Jesus Christ. Only then will your wildest dreams come true, and the possibilities for which your soul yearns most will be God's gift to you in response to how you have set your hopes on Him.

He Shares Our Sorrows

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4 | HEBREWS 2:5-18 | DOUG DORTCH

Life can be grueling, even at a time like this—or maybe we should say especially at a time like this. No amount of tinsel and glitter can hide the pain and anguish too many are experiencing at precisely this season of the year, from the lonely to the grief-stricken to the financially strapped. In some way, almost everyone comes to Christmas with a sorrow he or she is struggling to overcome.

It's not something we relish talking about. Why share your struggle with someone who is already occupied with theirs? If we do so, we probably won't gain any sympathy. We likely won't garner any compassion.

But suppose I tell you there is Someone who understands and is willing to share your sorrow?

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a sorrowful people to assure them they were not forgotten. God had seen them in their sorrow. God had felt compassion for them in their pain. Most of all, God had entered into it in order to experience their dejection and to undergo their disappointment.

In other words, God chose not only to be with us in Jesus Christ, but to be “like us.” His identification with us in the incarnation wasn't just for sympathy, either; it was for our redemption! From Jesus' birth, God was in Christ as He “suffered death” so He might “taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:9 NIV), that we might be infused with divine joy.

At times we do things out of obligation; at other times we do them out of desire. During the Christmas season, we see both expressions. There are times when we are forced to give presents and there are times when we are excited to do so.

When Hebrews tells us Jesus had to be made like us—His brothers and sisters—in every way (Hebrews 2:17), it is saying Christ's love for us was so great that He was compelled to take on our sorrowful existence. Far from being an obligation on Jesus' part, the incarnation was a joyful expression of God's redemptive love offered graciously to us through the Bethlehem Baby.

If this is not a good time for you, you don't have to be bound by your sorrow. “Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, [Jesus] is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18 NIV). Jesus takes us by the hand and leads us through the valleys of our sorrows. You can be saved from it. If you will take His hand, entrust to Him your heart, and let Him lead you back from the gloom that has surrounded you, our Savior who shares our sorrows will surely lead you along a brighter path to a more joyful way.

Fix Your Thoughts on Jesus

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5 | HEBREWS 3:1-6 | DOUG DORTCH

What occupies your thoughts the most in this season of the year? If you're honest, it's more than likely the gift you anticipate receiving on Christmas Day. That's understandable. There's something special about being on the receiving end of something good we do not deserve. But what if your obsession with material gain—even at this special time of the year—kept you from receiving the best gift of all?

The writer of Hebrews takes that approach as he directs his readers not to lose sight of Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest to whom we confess (Hebrews 3:1). Much of the instruction to this point in the letter has focused on the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is greater than the angels (Hebrews 1–2). He is also greater than Moses, the one through whom God worked to reveal His Commandments to His people.

Both Moses and Jesus were sent by God to lead His people. Moses, of course, was the one whom God had appointed to lead the children of Israel from their Egyptian bondage to freedom in the Promised Land of Canaan. Meanwhile, Jesus was God's Messiah, His Anointed, who through His death on the cross delivered us sinners from an even greater bondage to an even greater rest—one that assures us of everlasting life. While Moses was a servant in God's redemptive purpose, Jesus was God's Son, incorporating us into the people of God that nothing will ever be able to tear down or destroy.

When I was a teenager, I worked in my father's store, spending most of the Christmas season assembling bicycles, tricycles, and wagons. It was enjoyable work, but at the end of each day, I'd end up with a little stack of loose parts that never made it onto any of the items I was assembling. I've often wondered if those parts were necessary and if what I put together stayed together.

God is assembling a people through whom He intends to put the world to rights. If we follow Jesus and hold onto the courage and hope we have in Him, we join in that important work and participate in God's work of redemption. If, however, we lose our focus and forget the most important piece of all, nothing we do will last past the first of the year.

As Jesus was faithful, let us be faithful also. Then, we will be assured a place in God's house and a spot at the heavenly table where joys immortal will flow.

Soften Your Heart

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6 | HEBREWS 3:7-19 | DOUG DORTCH

Why is it that we can be so stubborn with the people we love the most? That's a question many of us are confronted with around the Christmas season when the pressures of the holiday start to work on us and our relationships. It doesn't take long before we realize we need to deal with that stubbornness; otherwise it will surely rob us of our joy.

That's actually one of the major themes in Hebrews, in particular the stubbornness we at times are prone to show to God. Most of us would argue that our commitment to God is steadfast and secure. But does God see it that way? Does God have any assurances that our faith will never falter? Can God count on us to be the people He needs us to be as He goes about the task of redeeming the world?

This section of Hebrews broaches for the first time the topic of *apostasy*, or “lack of faith.” Most people define apostasy as one's loss of salvation, but that's not what the term really means. Apostasy is about our relationship with Jesus and the stubbornness we sometimes show with respect to following His lead.

There is great enthusiasm in any relationship—a business relationship, a social relationship, a personal relationship—in the beginning; but if steps are not taken to deepen that relationship, the enthusiasm will never last. It won't weather the “down moments” of life, and people will one day wake up and come to the realization that the relationship is over. What once was vibrant has become lifeless. What once was passionate has become petrified.

Petrification is an interesting topic. Researchers don't completely understand how the process works, but they have determined three conditions that must exist in order for wood to be changed into stone. First, oxygen has to be cut off from the wood. As long as the wood has a source of oxygen, it will live and grow. But cut off the oxygen and you also cut off the potential for growth. Second, minerals from a nearby source of water must be deposited into the fluid-filled openings in the wood, which exist to preserve its tissues. Third, everything must happen over a long period of time. In other words, the process of petrification is a slow one, sometimes taking millions of years!

Faith becomes stony in the same way. First, the Holy Spirit gets cut off in our lives, not so much because the Spirit abandoned us but because we stopped welcoming the Spirit's presence. When that happens, unspiritual influences fill those places the Spirit once occupied, compromising our conviction and diluting our zeal. In time, the things of God don't matter as much to us anymore. They don't carry as much significance because we've allowed other things to take their place. We finally come to a place where we only listen to our hearts, hard and stony as they are, and can no longer hear and heed the merciful, life-giving heart of God.

(Continued on the next page)

Soften Your Heart: Continued

This passage in Hebrews breaks down those consequences in vivid fashion in verses 16–18. “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest if not to those who disobeyed?” (NIV).

The writer is saying it’s time to wake up! God hasn’t just written a note to warn us of our stubborn ways. He loves us more than that. God has given us a Word that became flesh. God has given us His Son, who suffered and died and was raised to God’s right hand so that we might enter God’s promised rest through faith in Him. Furthermore, the writer tells us to encourage one another in this respect. “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13 NIV).

It really is all about relationships in the end, is it not? It’s about both our relationship with God through Jesus Christ and our relationship with one another. In isolation, we are likely to give in to the subtle temptations that press upon us in the course of our everyday lives. But if we come together for mutual encouragement, then the Spirit will flow among us, our devotion will be kept warm and glowing, and our hope will be less likely to flicker and petrify. If you want your faith to be vibrant and influential, you need other believers in your life to encourage you, and they need you as well.

Wonder-Filled Rest

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9 | HEBREWS 4:1-10

MARY SPLAWN



Rest seems really appealing at this time of the year, doesn't it? All of the hustle and bustle of the Advent season can wear a person down. Instead of focusing on the meaning of Jesus' incarnation, we often find ourselves buried in the minutiae of the current moment. "What should I wear to this party? What should I fix for that gathering? Whom haven't I shopped for on the list? What is the last day for delivery by Christmas? Why isn't my family doing more to help me?" The irony is that Advent is a season where we should slow down to contemplate the wonder of Jesus' birth. Yet many of us work ourselves into a tizzy instead.

Today's passage comes as a sort of correction or even an invitation to us. We are reminded of the great promise of God's future rest. This is a rest that we look forward to when our faith in Jesus is made sight. But the passage also mentions the importance of listening today. We must slow down on this day and rest in God's presence through prayer, listening for His voice and praying that we will not be hardened to His love and grace displayed around us.

In other words, let's not forget to invite Jesus into all the busyness of preparing for His celebration. Ask the Lord to help you walk closely with Him during this season. Bring Him your burdens, fears, complaints, questions, and requests today. Ask Him to give you renewed joy in all that you do, awareness of His Spirit's presence, and rest in the midst of a busy—but truly wonder-filled—season!

The Only All-Knowing One

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10 | HEBREWS 4:11-13

MARY SPLAWN

The song “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” is a favorite at school programs this time of year. Kids sing that Santa “sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake!” But the truth of the matter is, no one but God is all-knowing!

Santa may not know if we've been bad or good, but God does. Verse 13 says it this way: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (ESV).

This passage hints back to Adam and Eve, who tried to cover up after they sinned. They did not want to be near God because they were ashamed. Sometimes we shy away from communion with God for the same reason. We do not want Him to see the sinful things we have done. But our hiding is in vain. God doesn't have to make a list and check it twice; He always knows if we're naughty or nice.

Now, apart from the grace we have by faith in Jesus, this truth of God's omniscience is crushing. He knows our every deed, and we will never measure up. But as the Christmas story reminds us, in God's great mercy, a Savior has been born to us!

Jesus calls us to the grand story of redemption through His blood. Our sinless Savior bore the full weight of our sins on the cross, and we are called to respond with faith that is followed by good works. But we aren't called to be good for goodness' sake, as the song suggests. Instead, Jesus calls us to be a light to others so they might also see and experience God's matchless love and grace. May our purpose today be to share the love of Christ with each person with whom we come in contact, beginning with those in our household and continuing on with those we meet through commerce or community.

Let Us Draw Near

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11 | HEBREWS 4:14-16

ISAIAH CRUZ

Have you seen kids who are caught doing something they shouldn't have been doing? Perhaps you have seen a toddler who itches to touch whatever you tell him not to touch. What would his reaction be if you caught him red-handed? You might witness a complex mixture of emotions, but one thing is certain: he would feel exposed and embarrassed. He would know he had done something wrong.

The fact of the matter is that God is holy, and His Word is, as we saw yesterday, “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12 ESV). Like a toddler, when we think about our own sinfulness, we quickly realize we are also exposed before God's sight (Psalm 139:7).

Let's go back to the toddler. If you ask him why he disobeyed you, you will either get an excuse, silence, or unrealistic promises. When the holiness of God confronts our sins, we can either respond with excuses, indifference, or huge promises that we will never sin again. However, that is not the way grace works.

During this season of Advent, we celebrate the beauty of the incarnation. We confess that Jesus became man. Because Jesus became a man, He can “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15 ESV). Unlike us, Jesus defeated every temptation and relied on the Word of God for His sustenance (Hebrews 4:15; Matthew 4:4).

For a spiritual toddler like me, that seems intimidating at first. How can I possibly imitate Jesus, seeing that He is perfect and I am not? Take comfort. We have been washed by the blood of Jesus and are now adopted children of God. Through Jesus, we have access to “the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16 ESV), where Jesus continues to advocate on our behalf.

You don't have to react like the toddler when you are confronted by your sins. Go boldly to the Father and ask Him for forgiveness, being confident that you will “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16 ESV). Like this closing prayer, may our prayers be filled with the language of this passage as we come boldly to the Father during this Advent season: “Grant these our prayers, O Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen” (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1979 edition).

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Perfect-ed

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12 | HEBREWS 5:1-10
MARY SPLAWN

When Wayne and I first married and moved to Alabama, we went to the northern part of the state to cut down the perfect Christmas tree. We had visions of a scene right out of a Hallmark movie. Our first disappointment came when we realized that even the northernmost part of Alabama is too far south for our favorite Christmas tree type: Fraser Fir. Our second disappointment came when we arrived at our house after hours of deliberation and the long ride home. As you can probably guess, the tree was too big for our house. The not-so-perfect tree became even less desirable when we cut off some of the bottom AND some of the top to make it work! While it might be an understatement to say the tree had its weaknesses, we made the best of our situation, added lights and ornaments, and Christmas went on!

In this passage, the author of Hebrews mentions that Jesus was perfected. But what does that mean, since Jesus was never lacking or even in need of a sprucing, like our Christmas tree? We need some clarification. How is it that Jesus, being made perfect, “became the source of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9 ESV)?

The author reminds us that Jesus has always been faultless (see Hebrews 4:15, 7:26, and 9:14), so “being made perfect” cannot be in reference to some type of movement from sinfulness to sinlessness. If we read carefully, we can see that “being made perfect” from verse 9 is synonymous to “learned obedience” in verse 8. In His earthly life, Jesus proved Himself obedient when His faith was tested, especially through suffering. In other words, Jesus went from untested obedience into suffering, and He remained sinless in the midst of great tribulation, which proved His obedience. He was proven perfect!

Therefore, we praise Jesus this Advent season and all times of the year, for He is the only one who can endure suffering perfectly, and His is the only name by whom we can be saved. Take a moment to thank Jesus for His faithful obedience to the Father and His grace to provide salvation for us weak sinners in need of a perfect Savior.

Moving from Milk to Meat

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13 | HEBREWS 5:11-14

MARY SPLAWN

The image of transitioning from milk to solid food is very familiar for me this year because I have a nine-month-old daughter. As you can imagine, we've had many messes as our little one learns to swallow instead of spit!

Likewise, Christians often experience difficulty learning to digest the solid food of the disciplined Christian life! Sometimes we just don't see the nutritional value that right living and thinking possess. But, just like infants, we must learn to eat solid food in order to grow.

What are some of the solid foods of Christian life? Here are a few suggestions: patience, purity of heart, trust in the midst of the unknown or suffering, commitment to the church body, discernment about how we spend time and money, love and grace for all people, and allegiance to Christ in all things.

Consider the different areas of your life. Are your actions in line with your beliefs? Do you invest your time and resources in growing strong in the faith? Are you maturing in your faith over time?

Remember that maturity is a process. My daughter didn't go from milk to meat overnight. She started with purees, moved on to soft foods and then small chunks, and will one day move forward to biting off food for herself.

The same is true with our quest for Christian maturity. Through a series of devotional practices and steps in the right direction, we are able to distinguish good from evil and enjoy the joy of following Christ in word and deed.

Foundations: Necessary and Not Enough

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16 | HEBREWS 6:1-12 | BEN WINDER

Perhaps you've run across Robert Fulghum's classic *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. That title is quite the sentiment. It is a callback to the simpler things, a suggestion to not make life too complicated by being sure we remember the elementary things we learned so very long ago.

It is a nice sentiment, but the author of Hebrews seems not at all satisfied with that idea, at least as far as it might mean that some would settle into elementary things when it comes to our faith. Certainly the fundamental doctrines are important. We frequently recite many of them together as a congregation in our Affirmation of the Faith. Yet the author of Hebrews urges us to move beyond elementary teachings and be taken forward to maturity.

The metaphor the author uses of the foundation of a building is a powerful one. Foundations are vital for the construction of an edifice. If your foundation is insecure, the results can be tragic. We need solid foundations. Yet how ridiculous an architectural monstrosity we would construct if buildings were only foundations stacked on top of each other. No, the wise builder, having placed a firm foundation, builds the greater, more beautiful thing upon it. So it should be with our faith.

How deficient would the lessons learned in kindergarten be if we truly based all our actions in this real, grown-up world upon them? Yet how much worse if we abandoned them altogether! The words in Hebrews regarding those who abandon the foundational truths of who Jesus is are among the harshest in Scripture: “. . . they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace” (Hebrews 6:6 NIV).

Heaven forbid we let go of the foundational truths we learned, even those that came to us in our kindergarten Sunday School class. They are called foundational truths for a reason.

Heaven forbid, too, we are tempted to be satisfied with the lighter, lower, lesser things of faith when God is calling us to the heavier, higher, holier things. Let us by God's grace strive to build a deeper, richer, fuller, more beautiful faith upon that foundation we have been handed. For it is in that faith, with patience, God will allow us to inherit all He has promised us in Christ Jesus.



Better Than a Pinkie-Promise

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17 | HEBREWS 6:13-20 | BEN WINDER

Do you remember that most solemn and serious of commitments one could make in elementary school? Clearly, I mean the pinkie-promise. To add a pinkie-promise to your word was to, in effect, chisel it in immovable assuredness. There was also, of course, the swears one could offer upon one's mother's life or grave, or the crossing of one's heart and hoping to die, as if that somehow added to the sincerity of the promise. And if that proved not to be sufficient, perhaps some bold but unbelieving child would declare on the playground to the shock of all, "I SWEAR TO GOD!"

Jesus told us not to swear an oath at all. Instead, we are simply to let our yes be yes and our no be no. And why should we not swear? It is because we have no power to control the color of our head of hair, much less the outcomes that are to happen in this shockingly tenuous thing we call life. We are not to swear by heaven, nor earth, nor Jerusalem. We are to let our yes or no stand alone, for as Jesus taught, anything beyond this comes from the evil one. For the faithful folk where I grew up, this command is the basis for adding to their commitment to show up to any event with the caveat, "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." We can promise, but our promises only go so far. Even our most sincere pinkie-promises.

God is not like us. When God made His promise to Abraham, God swore by God, because there was no one greater for God to swear by. We might swear on pinkies or mothers' graves or even to God, but there is no greater authority for God to swear by than God's self. And just as God is unchanging, so God's promise is unchanging. God cannot lie.

This Advent season, take heart. Even when the creeks rise in our lives, we can anchor our souls, firm and secure in God's sure, unchanging, and certain promises. We can know that just as Abraham received what had been promised to him, so, too, shall we receive what has been promised to us. Christ, our High Priest forever, has come. Christ, our High Priest forever, shall come again. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Melchize-who?

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18 | HEBREWS 7:1-10 | BEN WINDER

Among the New Testament writers, only the author of Hebrews refers to Jesus as High Priest. It is a bit of an ironic thing, considering the role the high priests played in Jesus' crucifixion. At one point, the author picks out Melchizedek—an allusion you'd be forgiven for missing. Melchizedek is a relatively minor character in Abraham's larger story, mentioned only in a few verses of the Old Testament: Genesis 14:18–20 and Psalm 110:4. He was, best we can tell, a royal priest in the city that would become Jerusalem. He was king and priest of the place that would become Israel's capital long after his encounter with Abraham.

The author of Hebrews also includes some information about Melchizedek's genealogy—or lack thereof—which, being beyond the Old Testament account, the author apparently garnered from extra-biblical resources now lost to history. To this the author adds a strange argument about Melchizedek being superior even to Levi, the father of Israel's priesthood.

What in the world is the purpose of this passage? Buried in the regalia of ancient, religious ritual, through intricate and antiquated modes of thought, we are shown the superiority of the great High Priest, whom God has set in the eternal sanctuary to serve humanity forever.

That is to say, Jesus is a royal High Priest, but not at all like the high priests the audience of Hebrews knows. To what could Jesus be compared? He is likened unto that mysterious character Melchizedek, to whom Abraham bowed and offered tithes. And so Melchizedek and the whole of the Old Testament Law, prophets, and writings point to this Jesus.

Jesus is greater than Abraham. Jesus is greater than the priests, even Levi. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus is even greater than Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews wants us to know that if Abraham had encountered Jesus, Abraham would have bowed to Him just as he bowed to Melchizedek. Jesus is the King of righteousness, the King of peace, the High Priest forever without end, the Son of God, the only One worthy of our everything.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus coming to us in Bethlehem to the songs of angels and the awe of shepherds, may we consider just how great Jesus is. If encountering Melchizedek led Abraham to offer a tenth of his plunder, how much more should an encounter with Jesus, the One who has come and is coming again, lead us to pour out our all in worship of our royal High Priest? Let us do just that this Advent season.

A Better Way

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19 | HEBREWS 7:11-22 | BEN WINDER

Do you remember when you first learned about keyboard shortcuts? (If you haven't yet, Google it; they will change your life for the better!) Instead of taking your mouse all the way to the edit menu and selecting "cut," then repeating the arduous task to select "paste," you can just do two quick shortcuts—"Ctrl-X, Ctrl-V"—and *voila!* The task is accomplished without taking your hands off the keyboard. This is not to suggest the menu option is entirely ineffective. Those who remember a world before computers made such copying and pasting possible—who perhaps remember that cutting once required actual scissors and pasting once required actual paste—would no doubt know that moving one's cursor to the menu bar is a great improvement. Yet there is a better thing.

If you know about keyboard shortcuts and you find yourself watching someone work who is unfamiliar with this life-changing technological innovation, it can be an anxiety-inducing experience. That is, unless you have the opportunity to share the "gospel" of shortcuts with them. On the other hand, if you watch a real whiz with shortcuts deftly maneuver through the digital world with shortcuts unknown to you (say, perhaps, a professional video or image editor), you will no doubt be filled with awe, if not a bit of sinful envy.

In some ways the Old Covenant was good. It was a way for God's people to be in tenuous connection with the divine, though really it was weak and useless. Now whether that Covenant and those priests were scissors and glue or old-fashioned menu clicking, I'll leave to you to decide; but this I know: something (or rather, Someone) better has come.

Jesus is the Guarantor of a better Covenant. Perfection could not be achieved the old way by the old priesthood. Striving fruitlessly by one's works to match the flawless, sinless perfection of God is a good way to wear ourselves out and to realize we cannot measure up to God's demands. As Paul told the Romans, ". . . no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20 NIV). The Law could show us our shortcomings, but it did not lead to indestructible life. No, that took a new thing. That took Jesus.

Perhaps this Advent season, God might remind you of the indestructible life that is ours in Christ Jesus, with whom you might share this better hope, the better Covenant that is offered to us in Christ, our royal High Priest who has come and is coming again. That is good news, undoubtedly more life-changing than even keyboard shortcuts.

Sacrifice Parade

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20 | HEBREWS 7:23-28 | BEN WINDER

The stench must have been wretched: long lines of livestock, birds, and produce coming to the temple to meet their ends for the sake of sacrifice to Yahweh. The smell of the temple mount must have been something like the mixture of a zoo, a slaughterhouse, and a barbecue joint all mixed together. On and on it went, day after day, slaughtered animal after slaughtered animal. The priests were kept busy spilling the blood and stoking the fires for their own sins and for the sins of the people entrusted to their spiritual care. They kept it up: the weighty, tiresome task of killing for recompense until the ultimate end of sin—that is, death—caught up with them, too. It is almost tragic to ponder. Day after day, they worked until their lives gave out, giving their entire lives to continually offering sacrifices, which, at best, brought right standing before God only temporarily. It was holy work, but at times it must have seemed wholly useless.

It has been said the shortest summary of the book of Hebrews could be, “Jesus is better.” The new oath God makes to us through Jesus is better than the Law God gave Moses. Jesus is a better Priest than the generations that dutifully worked in the temple. There are at least a couple of reasons for this.

First, Jesus lives forever, so He’s able to permanently intercede on our behalf. Death could not keep Him in its grasp. There is no need for generation after generation of priests to do the interceding until death takes them. Jesus alone can carry the baton into eternity.

Second, and even better, there is no longer the need for continual sacrifices. There is no longer the need for the constant parade to the slaughter. Jesus sacrificed Himself once for all, bringing an end to all other sacrifices.

The Law was weak and useless, for the Law made nothing perfect. The Law appointed men as high priests in all their weaknesses. Jesus is better. In Christ, we have a High Priest who is without weakness. In Christ, we—yes, even we—are being made perfect. God has kept the promise to us in Jesus the Son, who has been made perfect forever—holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Yes, Jesus is better. Thanks be to God, Jesus has come to us.



The Uniquely Qualified High Priest

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23 | HEBREWS 8:1-7

WAYNE SPLAWN

Sometimes it can be difficult to find the right candidate to fill a job opening. Because of the nature of some jobs, many applicants do not meet the educational requirements. Other applicants do not have the necessary experience. And still others are passed over because they do not have the character that meets the expectations of the company or a personality that would be a good fit with others on the team. Human resource managers and hiring agencies often feel as if they are looking for a needle in a haystack when trying to find the ideal candidates to fill certain positions.

In Hebrews 7, we read about the inadequacy of the many priests who served through the Levitical priesthood. According to the job description, the ideal high priest would be holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens, and immortal. Talk about high qualifications! Every Levitical high priest was guilty and stained by sin, and because of their sins, they would eventually die. No human could ever expect to be the ideal candidate to serve as high priest.

In Hebrews 8:1, the author of Hebrews pronounces the good news that in Jesus, we have finally found the High Priest we need. In the incarnation, Jesus—the pre-existent Son of God—took on flesh and became the only Person qualified to serve as a High Priest of the new, eternal Covenant that has eclipsed the temporary Covenant regulated by the Levitical code. During this week, we will learn more about the more excellent ministry Jesus has in comparison to the Old Covenant that has passed away. Thank God today for providing Jesus to be the uniquely qualified High Priest who ever lives to intercede for us.

A New Law Written on Our Hearts

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24

HEBREWS 8:8-13 | WAYNE SPLAWN

Helping children become the men and women we believe God would have them be is difficult work that requires a lot of time, patience, and prayer. Our desire is for them to one day become people who do the right things for the right reasons. Rules are one tool we use as we are seeking to instill godly character in children. We pray that the use of explicit rules will be temporary. Our hope is that over time, obedience to the rules will transform their character so they almost instinctively live in a way that is consistent with the rules we have put in place over the years.

The stipulations of the Old Covenant were meant to help God's people learn how to live as His holy people on this earth. Unfortunately, God's people were never very good at living according to the Old Covenant. Rather than trying to understand the heart and intent of the Lawgiver, God's people often did the least they had to do in order to meet the minimum requirements of the Law; they sometimes even totally ignored the Law altogether.

In Hebrews 8:8–13, we see that what we need is not more resolve to live in line with the Old Covenant. From the story of God's people throughout the years and from our own experience, we know we have no hope of keeping the laws in our own power. Instead, we need a totally new Covenant and transformed hearts. Rather than trying to live according to external regulations, we need God to change us from the inside out. This is exactly what God has accomplished for us through the life, death, resurrection, and ongoing ministry of Jesus, our great High Priest. Today, ask God to continue to transform your heart so your obedience will flow from the gratitude you feel in response for all God has so graciously given you in Jesus. Ask the Lord to empower you to live in a way that is consistent with His heart.

Going Where We Do Not Belong

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25

HEBREWS 9:1-10 | WAYNE SPLAWN

My son loves the game of baseball. From a very early age, it was evident he had an extraordinary love for the game. This love of baseball has led us to be zealous fans of the University of South Carolina baseball team. A few years back, we had the opportunity to visit the Gamecock locker room during a trip to watch the Gamecocks play in Columbia. It was a very neat experience. Part of what made it so special was that we were allowed to enter a place we could not have gone on our own merits. We had no passes that would have qualified us to enter the locker room. Instead, we were allowed to enter because we were invited by someone who had the right to be there. Our ability to enter this special place was granted to us by another person.

The Levitical high priest was allowed to go into the most holy place once a year to offer sacrifices for his sins and for the sins of the people. When he went into the most holy place, he understood that he was in a sphere he did not have the right to enter, and he could only enter because God graciously allowed him to on the basis of the blood of a sacrifice.

In contrast to the Levitical high priest, Jesus has entered into the very presence of God on our behalf. The most holy place was a shadow of the present reality Jesus occupies in God's presence, and Jesus is qualified to enter God's presence through the merit of His own shed blood. Even now, Jesus dwells in God's presence to represent us before the Father. As you celebrate Christmas today, thank God that you can boldly enter His presence because of the hope of the incarnation and the work of Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. Consider how much of a privilege it is that you and I are allowed to enter into the very presence of God because of all that Jesus has accomplished on our behalf.

A Reminder of Our Redemption

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26

HEBREWS 9:11-22 | WAYNE SPLAWN

One of my favorite things to do in the weeks leading up to Christmas is purchase and decorate a Christmas tree. I love going to the tree lot in search of a tree that has just the right size and shape. I love hauling it home in the back of my truck, and I love hanging ornaments on the tree. Many of the ornaments bring back great memories of past Christmas celebrations.

The yearly sacrifices prescribed under the Old Covenant also served as a reminder to God's people. They reminded them of the truth that they would never be able to fully satisfy the demands of the Law. A new year would bring new sins and the need for new sacrifices. The sacrificial system could never perfect the conscious of the worshiper. The New Covenant established by Jesus was different in this regard. Rather than leaving us with a guilty conscience, the forgiveness Christ has secured on our behalf totally purifies us so we can be freed from trying to earn God's approval through dead works. This freedom makes it possible for us to serve the living God. Spend some time today in prayer thanking God for the complete forgiveness that is ours through faith in Christ. Celebrate the truth that we have been freed from dead works so that we might serve God from a heart of love and gratitude.

Eagerly Waiting for His Return

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 27

HEBREWS 9:23-28 | WAYNE SPLAWN

The airport is usually a happy or sad place for me. I do not travel via airplane very often, so I am usually at the airport to see off friends or loved ones as they embark on a trip or to receive them upon their return. I'm sad when friends or family members are heading off on a long trip because I will miss them while they are away. On the other hand, I'm filled with excitement when I'm going to the airport to greet someone upon their return. You might even say I'm filled with a great expectation for their arrival. One of the most frustrating experiences is waiting for someone whose flight has been delayed for some reason. Eager anticipation sometimes gives way to frustration and a sense that the person in question will never arrive.

Hebrews 9 closes with the promise that one day, Jesus will return to this earth. And on that day, those of us who have eagerly awaited His coming will rejoice with exceeding joy as our faith becomes sight. During this Christmas season, we celebrate Jesus' first appearance into this world at His birth. This celebration is also a reminder that Jesus will come once again to complete the work of redemption He has started. If you are weary this Christmas, take heart that Jesus will one day return. Ask the Lord to give you faith to believe and to eagerly wait for His return.

The Remedy for Guilt

MONDAY, DECEMBER 30 | HEBREW 10:1-18 | AMY HIRSCH

Do you struggle with guilt over confessed sin? I have to admit to you that sometimes it is hard for me to believe that God really has forgiven my sins. I can lie awake in bed for hours thinking back on certain situations and feel the guilt and anxiety fill my heart. In some ways, it gives me empathy for the Israelites, who would come again and again to bring their sacrifices to Jerusalem. Each year, they would visit the temple on the Day of Atonement. As they watched these offerings being made for their sins, they had to have wondered about the moral agency of the animal they brought. “How would an unwilling sheep or goat be an acceptable sacrifice for a human, for my willful misdeeds?” they might wonder. And so they probably walked home from Jerusalem with continual guilt, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4 ESV).

So why did God institute such a system in the first place? The author of Hebrews tells us the Law and the sacrifices were meant to foreshadow a greater reality. The daily and yearly sacrifices offered by the priests on behalf of the people couldn't forever cleanse them from their sins, but they pointed forward to a new day dawning, to the day when a perfect sacrifice would come on their behalf.

Hebrews 10 tells us that Christ is this perfect sacrifice offered once and for all on our behalf. The sacrifice He gave was not just through His death; the author of Hebrews quotes a Davidic Psalm to show us that Jesus not only died for our sins, but that He also lived the perfect life in our place (Hebrews 10:5–10)! His blood covers our transgressions, and when we believe in Him, we receive His righteous record, which includes a life fully conformed to the will of God.

One of the most beloved parts of the Christian liturgy to me is the confession of sin and the assurance of pardon which often takes place before the Lord's Supper. I believe there's something beautiful, powerful, and mysterious about confessing our sins corporately, in the reminder that we are all in this together and that we are all in need of God's grace in Christ. And although I can read the promises of Scripture to myself found in the assurance of pardon, sometimes I need to hear them proclaimed over me by someone else.

If you are like me, perhaps it is hard to let go of your sin and trust in God's sufficient grace. Yet Hebrews 10:1–18 gives us the perfect picture of the assurance of pardon through the image of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Christ isn't like the priests who went to offer sacrifices day after day, year after year, century after century; His death on the cross was enough. Truly, it is finished! On those days when guilt wants to have the last word, proclaim to yourself the promise of the redeemed found in Hebrews 10:17: “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (ESV). Take comfort that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, for the very Son of God seated at the right hand of the Father continues to intercede for you (Romans 8:34).



Holding Fast

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31 | HEBREWS 10:19-39 | AMY HIRSCH

While we don't know the identity of the author of Hebrews, one thing is for certain: he or she was quite the writer! There's a lot happening in verses 19–39, but if I had to look for a central theme, a common exhortation, it would be this: “Hold fast the confession of hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23 ESV). In Hebrews 10:1–18, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for us, once and for all. The author tells us to hold fast to this confession and this good hope that Christ died for us, that He was raised to life, that He is seated at the right hand of God, and that He will return.

We read a sobering message in verses 26–31 about impostors in the church—people who professed faith in Christ with their lips but denied Him with their lives. Much ink has been spilled on these verses and whether they call into question believers' eternal security, but I believe this passage is speaking about those who were apostates, who were perhaps part of the fellowship of faith but who never truly embraced the gospel. These people remained untransformed. Rather than holding tightly to their confession of faith, they held tightly to their sin and worldly standards. They found their identity not in Christ but in the things of this earth. They knew the truth of the gospel, but they refused to allow that truth to transform their hearts.

“But this is not your story!” the author of Hebrews seems to say in verse 32. He speaks to believers who have been transformed by the gospel, who have held fast to their confession, and who have experienced the reality of their faith, which has led to suffering. These first-century believers faced hardship because they refused to confess that Caesar was Lord. They professed allegiance to a different King, which led to poverty and imprisonment. Yet in those dark days, these Christians recognized that their only hope was in Jesus. They held fast to their faith, knowing they had a better possession—an abiding one—in the days to come, and a far better reward waiting for them when Christ would return.

What are you holding fast to? Is it your status? Is it the hope of a relationship, of a job, of retirement? Is it the promise of security and an easy life? Anything less than the hope of Jesus will disappoint you. It is only in holding fast to the confession of faith that Jesus is Lord and that He is enough that we can have true, abiding hope in the days of plenty and in the days of want. In the midst of suffering, may we, too, profess that we have a better possession and a greater reward because we have held fast to Christ, recognizing that even as we are holding fast to Christ, He also holds fast to us.

Faith in the God Who Keeps His Promises

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1 | HEBREWS 11:1-16 | AMY HIRSCH

Hebrews 11 is the beloved “Hall of Faith” passage, which illustrates what it means to hold fast to faith, to “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Spiritual giants like Abraham and Moses are mentioned in these verses as our examples of what it means to trust in God with firm confidence in His character and promises, believing that He will keep His Word even when you cannot see Him at work.

At first, it’s surprising to see Sarah, Abraham’s wife, mentioned (Hebrews 11:11). While no saint mentioned in this passage was perfect (Abraham lied twice about Sarah being his wife, Jacob was a continual trickster, and Moses struck the rock at Meribah in anger), in Genesis we’re told Sarah laughed when she learned of God’s plans to use her barren womb to bring about Isaac. Yet here the text tells us Sarah “received power to conceive, even though she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11 ESV). Sarah, rather than being scolded for her disbelief, is commended for her faith!

I think the story of Sarah stands out to us because it’s our story, too. Sometimes it is far easier to doubt than to believe that God will keep His promises. Sarah had waited for years for a child, and she had to have known she was past the point of fertility. And then, God appeared with this crazy plan to expand their family by giving them a son, whose offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky (Genesis 12:1–3, 15:1–6). At first, Sarah took matters into her own hands to make this plan happen by encouraging Abraham to have a child with her maidservant, Hagar. And yet that wasn’t how God was at work. When she heard God’s plan again, she laughed in disbelief. And yet, eventually, God worked to change her heart, to bring her to a place of faith where she was not laughing in cynicism at God but was laughing in delight with Him as she held the promised son, Isaac.

It’s appropriate to think about Sarah’s story in light of the Christmas story. It seems unbelievable that a woman far past the age of conceiving would give birth to a healthy baby, and that through that lineage, God would indeed extend Abraham’s family far beyond their wildest dreams! But it’s even more inconceivable to think that God would visit a young virgin named Mary, and that she, too, would be given a Child of promise—Jesus—who would save the people from their sins. And through His life, death, and resurrection, many more would have the opportunity to call themselves the very sons and daughters of God. Yet this is our story and our song, that God abhorred neither the womb of the barren nor the womb of the Virgin, but kept every one of His promises, which ultimately found their fulfillment in Jesus.

Faith in the Face of Death

THURSDAY, JANUARY 2 | HEBREWS 11:17-31 | AMY HIRSCH

As a fan of the South Carolina Gamecocks, I like to say, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” It’s easier to have faith in your football team’s success when their roster is full of seasoned five-star recruits and they’re led by a coach who has won multiple national championships. It’s harder to have faith if you’ve watched them lose to Kentucky several years in a row.

Our “Hall of Faith” saints in verses 17–31 had faith in God despite the difficult circumstances surrounding them. As I read these verses, I was reminded of the reality that life is rarely easy. These saints believed in God and held to their faith, to “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV) even in the face of suffering—even, in fact, in the face of death.

Abraham, in faith, offered up Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord when he was tested, believing God would keep His promises, even if that meant God would need to raise Isaac from the dead. Moses, in faith, led the people to cross the Red Sea, even though to the outsider’s eye such an action would mean certain death, either by the raging waters or by the angry hand of the Egyptians. Yet, they trusted that God would deliver them—and He did.

Even so, all of these saints still tasted death. As he was dying, Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph. On his deathbed, Joseph foretold the Exodus and told his descendants to take his bones back to the Promised Land. And even though God saved Isaac that day from an early death on Mount Moriah, one day, he, too, would die just like Abraham, Moses, and Rahab. We see no miraculous interventions on their deathbeds to revive their hearts and breathe life into their spirits. These saints, full of faith, died.

This may not seem like a hopeful word to us at first, but I believe there’s a promise here worth uncovering. That promise is this: the saints of old held to their faith in God even in the face of death, because they knew death was not the end of the story. They had faith that something greater was coming. Indeed, their faith pointed to the coming of Someone greater—Jesus! And because of Jesus, we, too, can have faith in the face of death because we know the One who defeated death. Because of our hope in Him, we, too, know death is not the end of the story. We, like Jesus, will be raised to life. As Charles Wesley tells us in his beloved hymn, “Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth” (Charles Wesley, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”).

A Better Plan

FRIDAY, JANUARY 3 | HEBREWS 11:32-40 | AMY HIRSCH

I'm a planner by nature. I plan out my days, though they rarely go as planned! I plan our meals and grocery list for each week. I keep our family travel and vacation calendar. Even when we're on vacation, it's hard for me to get out of my planner mode. I want to use every last second to see as many sites as possible, to try as many delicious restaurants as possible, and to stay as close to budget as possible.

The end of our "Hall of Faith" chapter also outlines a plan—a plan of how God would work through the Old Testament saints for His glory. We hear of their amazing feats of faith, from conquering kingdoms, to enduring persecution, to facing imprisonment and death. I have to admit that while part of this plan sounds glamorous, my human temptation would be to try to avoid the more difficult portions of the text, to "plan myself" out of the pain. After all, I would prefer not to be sawn in half, which was Isaiah's legacy. Yet these saints understood that God's power was made perfect in their weaknesses, and they had an eternal perspective which helped them understand the true purpose of faith. As one theologian put it, "Faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world: this was no doubt one of the lessons which our author wished his readers to learn. But it does carry with it great reward in the only world that ultimately matters" (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 329). You see, God's plan is a better plan because of His eternal perspective. While I'm sure none of these saints would have willingly chosen pain, they endured suffering because they believed there was something greater waiting for them through their obedience.

The beautiful part of this better plan is that, somehow, in God's graciousness, He decided to include us! Even though the text tells us the world was not worthy of these men and women of faith, we learn in verses 39–40 that they "did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (ESV).

These faithful men and women were waiting for God's deliverance, and they died waiting to see the promised day of redemption, when God would send a Savior to reconcile God and man. The sacrifices they made pointed forward in faith to the cross, to the final sacrifice made on behalf of mankind's sin now and forever. God's plan is better because we get the opportunity to enter into the same story as these "Hall of Faith" legends. And in the words of F.F. Bruce, "the 'better plan' which God has made embraces the better hope, the better promises, the better covenant, the better sacrifice, the better and abiding possession, and the better resurrection, which is their heritage and ours" (F.F. Bruce, 330).

Running the Race

MONDAY, JANUARY 6 | HEBREWS 12:1-2 | AMY HIRSCH

One of the privileges of attending Beeson Divinity School was the opportunity to worship each week in Hodges Chapel. That space is a holy, sacred, and formative place to me, even though on my first visit, I was probably taken aback by the majesty and artwork, having grown up in a small, Southern Baptist church where our largest concern was the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. The dome at Beeson is this beautiful painting depicting Hebrews 11-12 with all of the saints who have gone before us—both the saints in the “Hall of Faith” of Hebrews 11 and the saints of the church (early church fathers and mothers, missionaries, preachers, and faithful followers of Christ). While we don’t worship or pray to saints, they are a great cloud of witnesses who have shown us the way to Jesus through their lives of faith and sacrifice.

Yet the story did not end with them. The author of Hebrews wants us to understand that those who are in Christ are indeed saints and witnesses. We follow in the footsteps of Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Lottie Moon, and so many others who have gone before us. Now, it is our turn to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1 ESV). We’re given this picture of a race, in which we have been handed the baton and are instructed to press on, to be found faithful.

Yet the only way we can press forward is by fixing our eyes on Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2 ESV). There’s a lot of danger in running, especially if you’re trying to look in two directions at the same time! If we turn around and focus our eyes only on what is behind us—on what we have left behind to follow Jesus—we will stumble. If we are so consumed by how the people around us are following Jesus and fix our eyes only on them, we will be distracted. If we turn inward and can only sinfully focus on ourselves, we will trip and fall. We must fix our eyes on Christ and Christ alone.

And if Jesus is the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, and if we are running the race after Him, surely we must know that suffering will come. When Christ calls, He calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame. While we may not ever be nailed to a Roman cross and be crucified for our faith, we know that living for Jesus is at odds with the world and will bring persecution and pain. Yet the pain is temporary; the joy we will experience when we finish that race, are found faithful, and enter into the presence of Jesus will far outweigh any memories of suffering in this past life. On that day, we, like the saints who have gone before us, will hear that beloved welcome: “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”



The Gift of Discipline

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7 | HEBREWS 12:3-17 | AMY HIRSCH

As a kid, I always found there were two categories to my Christmas gifts: things I really wanted and things I knew my mother would get me because I needed them (like socks). Socks are a perfectly useful gift, but sometimes it's hard to be overjoyed about opening a package of them because it's difficult to think of socks as a gift.

At the beginning of Hebrews 12, the author gives us this beautiful metaphor of running a race for the Christian life. To run this race well, we must lay aside all unnecessary weights, put aside sin, and focus our gaze on the face of Jesus alone. This takes discipline from the Lord.

Sometimes the gift of discipline might seem like the gift of socks. It may not seem like a gift at all for the Lord to rebuke you. Think back to a moment when the Lord really began to work in your heart to convict you about an area of sin in your life. I doubt that was a pleasant feeling. Discipline is painful because it is a turning from what feels normal, good, and right to what is holy. The process of pruning is painful.

Yet we learn that discipline is indeed a gift, and a useful one! First, discipline from the Lord is a gift because it is a sign of His love for you. Earthly parents discipline their children because they love them and want what is best for them. It's the reason parents put covers over electrical outlets and warn children to stay away from hot stoves. How much more so is the discipline of the Lord a sign of His love for you? He knows what is best for you, even more than any earthly parent, and He knows sin will wreak havoc on your life. For that reason, He intervenes and disciplines you out of love for your own good, even when it doesn't feel good.

Second, the author of Hebrews tells us that discipline is a gift because "it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11 ESV). Just as those who train for a marathon must lean into the discipline of a regular training schedule to be able to run the race well, leaning into God's discipline for our sin helps us shed the unrighteousness that weighs us down. This process is known as sanctification; it is the work of the Holy Spirit to make you more like Jesus over time. And while it will never be fully realized on this side of heaven, the hope is that day by day, you would die to sin and self a little more and would see the fruit of the Spirit taking deeper root in your heart.

Take heart, knowing that when the Lord disciplines you, it really is a gift. His discipline is a sign that He cares for you, and His discipline is a promise that He will not leave you as you are. You are being made more like Jesus day by day.

A Tale of Two Mountains

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8 | HEBREWS 12:18-29 | AMY HIRSCH

Because I grew up in the foothills of western North Carolina, mountains hold special meaning for me. Any time I see mountains rising in the distance—especially the Blue Ridge Mountains—I am reminded of my childhood and also of the majesty of God. I don't think this is a coincidence; in Scripture, God's power was often revealed on mountains, and God often met with His people on mountains. Think of Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, of the promises of God dwelling with His people on Mount Zion, and the Transfiguration story in the gospels, which took place on either Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon.

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author has been contrasting the Old Covenant with the New Covenant to show us how much better the New Covenant under Christ really is. In Hebrews 12:18–29, he uses a tale of two mountains to make his point. “You have not come to Mount Sinai,” he seems to say in his opening argument. We haven't come to the Covenant of Sinai, full of blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and fear. We haven't come to a mountain where God's presence among His people must be mediated through a man like Moses. Of course, God used the Old Covenant and the Law revealed on Sinai to govern His people and to lead them. But that mountain, and that Law, and that Covenant were always pointing forward to another mountain, and to another Law, and to another Covenant—a far better one.

Instead, we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God. Because of the blood of Jesus, we have peace with God. There is no reason to fear His presence as the Judge of all, because we trust that, through Christ's sacrifice, we are made right with God. We, along with the angels, worship Jesus, “the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 12:24 ESV). And we are sprinkled with the blood of Christ that washes away our guilt permanently and speaks a far better word than the blood of Abel, which called out for justice and vengeance.

Of course, we live in Birmingham, Alabama, so we aren't really on Mount Zion right now, are we? We live in the midst of Red Mountain, yes, but the author of Hebrews wants us to understand that those in Christ experience this heavenly reality of being in the presence of God. Through Jesus, we have access to God the Father, which is something the Israelites living under the Old Covenant could never truly say. There were always stipulations on the high priest alone entering the holy of holies, and even he could not come into the presence of God with sin or uncleanness. But we can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of Jesus!

What's more, this spiritual reality will one day be a physical reality. One day, we will dwell in the new heaven and new earth, and God will make everything right again. On that day, we will dwell in His presence forevermore. So, perhaps every time you see a mountain, it will be a reminder for you of the presence and promises of God, and it will point you forward to the hope of a better covenant.

A Constant Savior and a Better City

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9 | HEBREWS 13:1-19 | AMY HIRSCH

As we come to the final chapter of Hebrews, we are reminded that we are all reading an epistle. You may have been so captivated by these long and lengthy arguments about a new and better covenant that you lost sight of the fact that this was a letter—a letter written by an unknown author, yes, but nonetheless, a letter written to believers. In Hebrews 13, the author gives readers many ethical exhortations, which is common in epistles. He implores them to show love to one another through their hospitality, through providing an encouraging presence to those in prison, and through marital faithfulness. The danger of greed is addressed. The readers are encouraged to follow their leaders faithfully and not to be led astray by those who preach a false gospel, proclaiming that certain food laws must be followed to be a part of God’s kingdom in Christ.

All of these ethical concerns are grounded in two key truths found in verses 1–19. First, we are reminded in Hebrews 13:8 that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Even if Christian leaders are tortured and put in prison, even if they are martyred for their faith, even if they are uncovered as hypocrites who were leading people astray, believers are reminded that Jesus is the true source of hope. Even the best of people will disappoint us, but Christ will never lead us astray. This truth gives us comfort as we pick up our cross and suffer as Christ did, going outside the camp to “bear the reproach He endured” (Hebrews 13:13). This good word, written to believers suffering for their faith, provided much-needed encouragement because it reminded them that their Lord also suffered. We don’t suffer alone; we trust that Jesus suffered for us and that He is suffering with us in all of life’s trials and tribulations. He is a constant Savior, a faithful High Priest who “knows our needs, to our weakness is no stranger” (John Sullivan Dwight, “O Holy Night”), and yet who is never changing and who promises He will never leave or forsake us.

We also trust that this suffering is temporary. The second key truth in this passage comes in verse 14: “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14 ESV). The author of Hebrews wants readers to understand that everything around them is temporary. The money they possess, the homes they live in, the jobs they hold, the things they’ve collected over the years, and their place in society will one day fade away because the earthly city they are living in was never built to last forever. In light of that truth, believers ought to hold loosely to all of these temporal things which will pass away. In Hebrews 12, we learned that the only kingdom that cannot be shaken is the one yet to come; the only city that will never fade is the one instituted by God and is the city we seek. Because of this great truth, we can endure suffering, persecution, and hardship of every kind because we know we are citizens of heaven and a better city awaits us.

This, after all, is the great hope we celebrate at Advent and Christmas; as we look back on Christ’s first coming to the world, we also look forward in hope to the day when He will return, when we will possess that long-awaited city, where we will dwell in the presence of God forever.

Good Word

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10 | HEBREWS 13:20-25 | AMY HIRSCH

The word benediction has Latin roots; it literally means “to speak well of,” although we might also say by extension that it means “good word.” We have benedictions at the end of our worship services; these “good words” spoken over the congregation are meant to be an encouragement and also a commissioning. The benediction of Hebrews 13:20–21 is one of my favorites in all of Scripture, because it is just that! It is a good word of encouragement as we hear these beautiful reminders of who Jesus is, and it’s also a word of challenge and commission as we are reminded that, in light of who Jesus is, we ought to live differently as people who have been redeemed.

Verse 20 gives us the good word of encouragement relating to our relationship with God because of Jesus. Through the cross, we are at peace with God; indeed, our God is a God of peace! This God of peace has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and because of Christ’s resurrection, we, too, have this hope of a new life to come. The author of Hebrews then uses this beautiful Old Testament imagery of Jesus as “the great shepherd of the sheep.” Throughout the book of Hebrews, we have heard again and again that the blood of Jesus is better than the blood of bulls or goats. He is the ultimate sacrifice, the final Passover Lamb.

Yet in this passage, the sheep metaphor shifts as Jesus is pictured as the Great Shepherd and us as His sheep. This metaphor resounds throughout the Old Testament; Moses and Aaron were pictured as shepherds leading the Israelites (Psalm 77:20), David declared that the Lord was his Shepherd (Psalm 23), and the priests were repeatedly condemned for being bad shepherds to their sheep because of their false teaching and unfaithful ways (Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34). But Jesus is the true, faithful Shepherd who gently guides His children, and He never leads them astray.

The commissioning of verse 21 comes in light of this great truth that we are being led by our Shepherd, Jesus Christ. How will He lead us? In kindness and with gentleness, yes, but He will also lead us by equipping us to do His will, “working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Hebrews 13:21 ESV). Our Shepherd will lead and guide us to do God’s will, to live in light of His kingdom ways, to choose holiness and righteousness over the ways of the world, and to seek the city that is to come. It’s frightening sometimes to think about how God might be leading us. What if He calls us to do something that is hard and far out of our comfort zone? We can take comfort in the truth that only God can equip us for the tasks to which He has called us. He alone can prepare us, He alone goes before us, and He alone works in us for His glory. We can’t do any of this on our own! It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us that we can respond to His faithful leading and can follow Him wherever He may go.

There’s comfort in knowing that, regardless of where our faith journey might take us in this life, our final destination is in the presence of the Almighty, where our faith will be made sight. As one of my favorite Christmas carols puts it, “And He leads His children on, to the place where He is gone” (Cecil Frances Alexander, “Once in Royal David’s City”). He leads us on to a better city and a better hope than anything this life can promise. This, indeed, is a good word! Praise God, and even so, come Lord Jesus, and lead Your sheep home.

