

Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews

Chapter 5: Jesus Christ our true High Priest, His sacrifice for us, and the reversion of the Jerusalem church

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)
by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill

- I. Introduction
- II. Translation
- III. Summary and Paraphrase
- IV. Verse by Verse Commentary

Introduction:

Chapter five may be divided into three parts: 1) the purpose of the priesthood generally and the uniqueness of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ in particular (vv.1-6); 2) a powerful description of our Lord's carrying out of His unique priestly duties in dying for us on the cross (vv.7-10); 3) Paul's challenge to the Jerusalem believers to turn back from their spiritual reversion and begin moving forward again in spiritual growth (vv.11-14).

The Aaronic Priesthood versus the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ: What is a priest, biblically speaking? The English word has a convoluted history having nothing etymologically in common with the Greek or the Hebrew words it translates in scripture, being originally derived through Latin and then German from the Greek word for elder, *presbyteres* (from which our word Presbyterian is derived, being a denomination characterized by governance by elders). The Greek word used in the Bible, *hierous*, is the standard word used for priest in pagan religion, namely, those who officiate at the temples of various gods and goddesses (from which the word "hieroglyphics" is derived, being "the writings of priests"). The Hebrew term which stands behind the translation "priest" in the Bible (which the Greek word *hierous* translates in the Septuagint, usage copied in the New Testament), is the word *cohen* (כֹּהֵן).

According to the best lexical resources available, although this root also occurs with the same meaning of "priest / to act as a priest" in Ugaritic, Phoenician, Ethiopic, Aramaic and Arabic, the original etymology of the Hebrew word *cohen* is unknown (as is the case with the other aforementioned Semitic languages).¹ The writers of the BDB lexicon sought to connect the root to the notion of divine and diviner (seer), with a subsequent development to one who officiates

¹ See especially *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edd. R.L. Harris, G.J. Archer, and B.K. Waltke (Chicago 1980), article #958 by J.B. Payne; similarly *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, edd. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner (Leiden 1958), s.v. כֹּהֵן.

on behalf of the divine / god.² As Driver (the "D" of BDB) says elsewhere (in commenting on the problematic usage at 2Sam.8:18; cf. 1Chron.18:17), "There is no [other] trace (i.e., in the OT) of the word having connoted any *secular* office", then concluding, "Whatever be the ultimate etymology of כֹהֵן, it was so limited by usage as to denote one who exercised certain *sacred* offices, who we should term 'a *priest*' ".³

This lack of etymological precision is telling and possibly figured into the Holy Spirit's choice of this word. The very first use of the word "priest" in scripture is precisely the context which Paul is using to explain the uniqueness of Christ's new high priesthood, namely, Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham after his victory over those who plundered Sodom. Thus the first priest in scripture is not a pagan one but a genuine one serving the actual one and only true God.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was *a priest of God Most High*.
Genesis 14:18 LSB

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had direct fellowship with the Lord, who walked with them "in the cool of the day" (Gen.3:8). This intimacy was lost at the fall – for sinful man cannot have direct fellowship with holy God (Gen.3:24). From that time forth, God could only be approached indirectly, through a go-between or mediator, and only on the basis of a sacrifice to propitiate the sin which alienates us from God. As all Christians should know, the only acceptable Mediator is Jesus Christ, and the only acceptable sacrifice was His own body, bearing our sins in spiritual death (aka, "the blood of Christ", a symbolic term referring to that sacrifice [see below]). Before our Lord came in the flesh and before the victory of the cross had been accomplished, these fundamental truths were portrayed through shadows, through human priests acting in the role of Christ, and through animal sacrifices which represented His spiritual death for us. The individual who performed these rites of symbolic mediation and propitiation is called everywhere in scripture, a "priest".

The Lord Himself performed these functions for Adam and Eve in His capacity of "*The* Angel of the Lord", taking away their fig leaves and clothing them in animal skins, the physical deaths of the animals so employed representing the spiritual death He would one day suffer to remove their sin to which their consciousness of nakedness testified. God never leaves Himself without a witness, and in later days He established family and kingly priesthoods of which Melchizedek's is our prime example – for this same purpose of spreading the essential gospel: Melchizedek's bread and wine are the archetypes of communion, with the bread representing the body of the Substitute who must be sacrificed in our place, and the wine representing His blood, His spiritual death which washes away the sin which otherwise will condemn us. All who have ever "called

² *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs (Oxford rpr. 1951). The BDB lexicon was itself substantially based upon E. Robinson's translation of Gesenius' lexicon.

³ S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books Samuel* (Oxford 1913) 284-285.

upon the Name of the Lord" have been given to understand these essential truths, the essence of the gospel message of trusting in God's Substitute, God's Sacrifice on our behalf, given to save us from sin and death, bringing us eternal life instead (Gen.4:26). When we believe in Him (Jesus Christ), we are saved, reborn, born from above through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, reconciled to "God Most High", relieved of the fear of the darkness, the fear of the grave, and the fear of the otherwise unavoidable and common fate of all human kind: physical death.

(14) Therefore since "these children" (i.e., believers given to Christ by the Father: v.13) are flesh and blood, [Christ] took on the same [flesh and blood] in a very similar fashion (i.e., not identical only in that He was virgin born and so without sin), in order that through His death He might put an end to the one possessing the ***power of death***, that is, ***the devil***, (15) and might reconcile [to God] those who were subject to being ***slaves*** their whole lives long by their ***fear of death***.
Hebrews 2:14-15

Believers are no longer subject to the systems of slavery set up by the devil to ensnare the human race, because in place of fear we now have a confident hope of eternal life and are actually ***looking forward*** to the end of this life and all the glories that will follow, rather than dreading and seeking to avoid physical death at all costs as all unbelievers do (Phil.1:21-23). And all unbelievers do so in one way or another. Satan has many lies designed to capitalize on this fear of death, lies which if believed relieve that fear by means of false hopes, false promises and various activities designed to take the unbeliever's mind off of this "ultimate concern". Satan's system of lies is designed to appeal to every possible personality type and every possible human desire in so doing. That is the real origin of religion of every sort, whether tending toward asceticism or licentiousness. For religion is, in essence, as its Latin meaning affirms, "superstition", being one system of untruth or another, all having in common that they cannot actually save anyone: that is something which only Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us could ever do.

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."
Acts 4:12 NKJV

It was thus inevitable that the devil would develop his system of religion, a system which, in the ancient world, possessed many common features, all of which were designed to mimic the genuine and divinely instituted practices of worship which bespoke the gospel through the shadows of animal sacrifice and the intercession of a symbolic intermediary.

(3) And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. (4) Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, (5) but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.
Genesis 4:3-5 NKJV

We all know the sequel. Cain was envious of his brother and rather than doing what God

required he killed his brother instead. Thus envy is in many ways the primary sin, since much if not all mental, verbal and physical sin is ultimately motivated by jealousy (Eccl.4:4; Jas.4:5; cf. 1Pet.2:1). To the human eye, the difference in sacrifice between that of Cain and that of Abel might seem insignificant, but in truth there was all the difference in the world: Abel's sacrifice symbolized our Lord's death for our sins, represented through physical death and blood; Cain's offering had no such symbolism and represented instead his own efforts of human good in "doing something" for God – which is the foundation and the essence of all legalism and of all godless religion. And all proponents of Satan's pagan religions (and of pseudo-Christian religions) ever since have followed the same path: treacherously representing false paths that lead to condemnation as genuine ways to approach God, through works rather than through grace.

(13) For men of this sort are false apostles, workers of guile, masquerading as apostles of Christ. (14) And it is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

(15) So it comes as no surprise that his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be according to their deeds.

2nd Corinthians 11:13-15

God has "set eternity" into the heart of every human being (Eccl.3:11-14), giving all who draw breath a natural inclination to seek Him out of an emptiness which needs to be filled (and which only He can fill) and out of a natural response to the reality of His existence writ large and undeniable in this marvelous creation of His (Rom.1:18-25; cf. Ps.19:1-6). But we human beings have been given the image of God, genuine free will which must be exercised in faith in order for us to be saved, faith, that is, in the only One who could produce that salvation for us, our Savior Jesus Christ. For those who resist the truth to which their own hearts and the entire universe attest, the devil has produced an entire world system designed to blind them and to keep them blind, "lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed" (Is.6:10 NKJV).

"Whenever anyone hears the message (lit., "word", *logos*) of the kingdom but does not let it [penetrate fully] in[to his heart], the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown beside the road."

Matthew 13:19 (cf. Rom.1:28)

"And these are the ones beside the road where the Word is sown. And when they hear it, Satan comes immediately and removes the Word which has been sown into them."

Mark 4:15

"And the ones [sown] beside the road are those who have heard [the truth of the gospel], then the devil comes and removes the Word from their heart, so that they might not believe and be saved."

Luke 8:12

Pagan religions, while in many ways their priests and temples and sacrifices and rites and laws may seem parallel to what the Law of Moses established, are, like Cain's offering, just below the surface polar opposites to the truth in fact. People tend to be attracted by religion and its rituals,

especially the more elaborate they are, the more embellished with impressively dressed priests, lavishly ornamented temples, appealing music, incense and paraphernalia, all betokening secret mysteries lying behind its enigmatic rites and sacrifices. This was certainly true of Israel.

(7) "Then I said to them, 'Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.' (8) But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said, 'I will pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.' (9) But I acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned before the Gentiles among whom they were, in whose sight I had made Myself known to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt."
Ezekiel 20:7-9 NKJV

(25) Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings
In the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?
(26) You also carried Sikkuth your king
And Chiun, your idols,
The star of your gods,
Which you made for yourselves."
Amos 5:25-25 NKJV (cf. Acts 7:43)

The golden calf episode (Ex.32:1-35) was just one of many such spiritual infidelities on Israel's part. Deifying aspects of God's creation instead of honoring Him is often at the heart of Satan's efforts in religion to coopt those who might otherwise turn to the truth and be saved.

(18) God's wrath is about to be revealed from heaven upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness – on men who suppress the truth [in their hearts about God] in their unrighteousness. (19) For that which can be known about God [from everyday experience] is obvious to them, because God has made it obvious. (20) His nature, though invisible, is nevertheless plainly apparent, and has been since His foundation of the world, for it may be clearly inferred from this creation of His – [this is true of] both His eternal power and His divinity – so that they are without any excuse: (21) they knew about God, but they neither honored Him as God nor thanked Him. Instead, they gave themselves over to [the] vanity [of this world] in their speculations, and their senseless hearts were filled with darkness. (22) Claiming to be wise, they became foolish, (23) for they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God **for images and likenesses of corruptible men, of birds and beasts and reptiles**. (24) For this [very] reason, God abandoned them to corruption in the lusts of their own hearts, that they might mutually defile their bodies (i.e., the very thing they lusted to do). (25) [And so] they exchanged the truth of God for the lie [of the devil], and **worshiped and served the creature** [Satan] in place of the Creator who is [worthy to be] blessed forever. Amen.
Romans 1:18-25

God gave us His creation not only as a place to exist and seek Him but also as a witness to His

"eternal power and divinity" (Acts 17:26-27; Rom.1:20; cf. Ps.19:1-6). He gave us the sun and the moon and the stars for the same reason (Gen.1:14-18), but abusing these gifts is what pagan religion always does, e.g., in astrology and in identifying planets and stars with pagan gods and goddesses, and as scientific secularism does as well, a religion in its own right – which wants to drain them of their divine origin and significance, as, e.g., astronomy focuses on "extraterrestrials" and evolution.

"And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven."
Deuteronomy 4:19 NIV

(26) "If I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in splendor, (27) so that my heart was secretly enticed and my hand offered them a kiss of homage, (28) then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high."
Job 31:26-28 NIV

These basic "elementary principles of the world" as scripture calls them (Col.2:8 NASB20; Gr., *ta stoicheia*; cf. Gal.4:3; 4:9; Col.2:20; 2Pet.3:10; 3:12; cf. Heb.5:12), the celestial bodies and their predictable motions useful for delineating the "times and seasons" (Gen.1:14), have long been perverted from their good and godly purposes – including that of evangelism in proclaiming the existence and goodness of God (Rom.1:20; cf. Job 36:24-25; Ps.19:1-6; 89:5; 97:6; Is.40:25-26) – and used instead by the evil one for his world system of religion to lead the human race astray.

(10) For the Day of the Lord will come like a thief, a day in (i.e., over the course of) which the heavens will depart with a roar (i.e., at the end of the Millennium), the very elements (*ta stoicheia*) will ignite and dissolve, and the earth and everything which has been done upon it will be laid bare [for the Lord's inspection] (i.e., the last judgment). (11) Since then all these things are destined to disintegrate in this way, [consider] what sort of [Christians] we ought to be, [devoted to] holy and godly conduct, (12) as we wait with apprehension and eager expectation the advent of the Day of God (i.e., the 2nd Advent). For on that day (i.e., at the end of it) the heavens will burst into flame and dissolve, and the elements (*ta stoicheia*) will catch fire and melt. (13) But we are awaiting new heavens and a new earth just as He promised – [a world] where [only] righteousness dwells.
2nd Peter 3:3-13

These "elementary principles of the world", *ta stoicheia* in Greek, while variously translated in English versions (because they are variously applied by writers of scripture), always reference the same essential idea: God's "basics of creation", meant for mankind's blessing, both in terms of our navigation of this world and tracking the passage of time, but also for our appreciation of the wonder of Him through considering the wonder of His creation. But the devil and his system of

pagan religions lead the foolish to focus on the creature rather than the Creator (Rom.1:25).⁴

See to it that no one be taking [control of] you as [though you were] plunder through the [so-called] study of wisdom (lit., "philosophy") and deception [which is] devoid [of truth], [which] agrees with human tradition, [which] agrees with [speculation about] the material principles of the world (*ta stoicheia*), but [which does] not agree with Christ. Colossians 2:8

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world (*ta stoicheia*), why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you] (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for wisdom, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches). Colossians 2:16-23

In both citations above, we see an overlap, so to speak, in Paul's usage of *ta stoicheia*, where the term occurs in an epistle (Colossians) which condemns paganism but uses the comparison to paganism to admonish his readers for wrongly continuing to follow the Law (and the false interpretation of it by unbelievers), inappropriate to do now that the Law has been fulfilled and its shadows replaced by the reality of Jesus Christ, His perfect person, God and now man since the incarnation, and His perfect work in dying for our sins, something the Law could only adumbrate symbolically.

The Law has served its purpose, but it did have an important one in its time. Israel was given a perfect counterweight to the pagan religious practices which every other nation on earth at the time of her calling out of Egypt was following in one way or another. Instead of rites, rituals, temples, priests and sacrifices which derived from the devil and whose purpose was to ensnare unbelieving humanity in a web of satanic deceit, Israel was given a tabernacle/temple with specific rituals that spoke only of the truth – through shadows, yes, but pointing unmistakably to the reality which lay behind them: the priest represented the Messiah, the temple God's heavenly abode, the ark and mercy seat His chariot-throne, the altar the cross, and the sacrifices our Lord's

⁴ See Hebrews Chapter 1, section I.b, "Gnosticism", for that movement's perversion of these elementary principles.

spiritual death thereon for all of our sins. We have examined the specifics of these symbols before, and as Paul will say about the paraphernalia of the temple later in this epistle, "but we cannot discuss these things in detail now" (Heb.9:5 NIV).⁵ Suffice it to note here that while the Law was "good" – and necessary, given the times in which and for which it was given, necessary to defend against false pagan rituals with a countervailing set of godly rituals founded on and illuminating the truth – it was also a form of indentured servitude, so to speak, requiring all manner of careful adherence to it in order to avoid violating it, a burden and a yoke which "neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10 NIV), including a set of requirements which were in fact impossible to carry out perfectly (Rom.3:20). That was of course deliberate, to make it clear that salvation had to come by grace through faith, not through any system of works, not even through the perfect Law, and far less through any secular system of works invented by the devil.

(21) Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.

(22) But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Galatians 3:21-22 NKJV

Thus our passages referencing *ta stoicheia*, the elementary principles of the world, demonstrate that the Law really was only meant to be temporary, a godly substitute, so to speak, for the paganism which had engulfed the rest of the world at that time. The Law was indeed "good" (1Tim.1:8), but it was also a form bondage (Gal.4:3; 4:9; 4:24-25; 5:1), never meant to be permanent (Gal.3:19; 3:24; 4:2), holding the line, as it were, until the Messiah whom the Law represents should come in the flesh and all the mysteries of the Law then be revealed in Him.

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he (i.e., the Messiah) to whom it (i.e., the scepter of rulership) belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his (i.e., at the second advent).

Genesis 49:10 NIV

Though unknown to the writers of scripture at the time (1Pet.1:10-12), there would be a gap between the Messiah's first coming – to save us from our sins – and His second advent when all of the wondrous things prophesied about Him and His world rulership would be fulfilled. This gap, the Church Age, is a blessing for us gentiles who are overjoyed to be saved and to have the wonderful opportunity to participate in the edification of the Messiah's assembly, His Church, and to win eternal rewards in the process. But for those who were expecting the crown of rulership without the sacrifice of the cross, the Messiah's first advent became a stumbling block (Is.8:14; Rom.9:32-33; 1Cor.1:23; 1Pet.2:8). For the believers in Jerusalem, it was tempting to become weary of waiting (cf. 2Pet.3:4), and to revert to the bondage of the Law once more, even though Christ had set them – as He has set us – free from that slavery to those shadows now

⁵ See The Satanic Rebellion, Part 1, section II.5.b, "The Illustration of the Tabernacle"; and Coming Tribulation 2B, under "The Earthly Tabernacle and Temple as a Type of the Heavenly Temple".

fulfilled (Gal.5:1).

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world (*ta stoicheia*).

Galatians 4:3 NKJV

(8) But at that time [when you were unbelievers], not knowing God, you were slaves to those things which are by nature not [truly] gods. (9) But now, having recognized God, or, as it really is, having been recognized by God, how is it that you are turning back to these weak and impoverished false [pagan] principles (*ta stoicheia*) which you wish to serve as slaves all over again? (10) You observe days and months and seasons and years. (11) I fear for you, that I may perhaps have spent my labor on you in vain.

Galatians 4:8-11

Observing "days and months and seasons and years" for the legitimate purposes of the Law was godly – when it was legitimate to follow the Law. But now that the Law and its shadows have been replaced by the reality of Jesus Christ and His cross, doing so is returning not really to the Law but to the pagan rituals to which the Law in its time had served as a counterpoint (i.e., *ta stoicheia* used in a godly system to combat their pagan usage). The Law was meant to lead to Jesus Christ; once Christ had come, going back to the Law was of necessity turning one's back on Him.

(23) But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. (24) Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (25) But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

Galatians 3:23-25 NKJV

Being believers in Jesus Christ Himself, His actual person come in the flesh and His completed work on the cross, we have been freed from the bondage of the Law, freed from the elementary principles of the world which foreshadowed His coming and His death on our behalf. Going back to the temple, going back to the Law (and, in reality, to its faulty interpretation and implementation at the hands of unbelievers), was actually worse than turning to paganism – precisely because of the deceptiveness of its false patina of legitimacy. The Law after the cross is in fact an anti-gospel which preaches salvation by works . . . when in fact the Law could never save in the first place inasmuch as salvation has always been on the basis of faith alone (Gen.15:6; Rom.4:1ff; Eph.2:8-9).

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1 NIV

Because of the coming of and the victory of our true High Priest, the soon to return King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we believers are now free from all such slavery, both to death (free from fear in confidence of eternal life) and to religion, including the now obsolete shadows of the

Law which serve no further spiritual purpose (beyond illuminating and being illuminated by the truths revealed in the New Testament; cf. Matt.13:52; Rom.15:4; 1Tim.1:8). And we now also share in our Savior's priesthood and kingship (Rev.1:6; 5:9-10; 20:6; 1Pet.2:5; 2:9)! As those belonging to Jesus Christ, we share the spoils of His victory on the cross (Ps.82:8; Is.33:23b; 53:12; Lk.11:21-22; Eph.4:7-10); we share in His new high priesthood (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:10; 20:6); and soon we will share in the rulership of His millennial kingdom as well.

(5b) To him, [Jesus Christ], who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, (6) and has made us **kings** and **priests** to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:5b-6 NKJV

As a result of the cross of Jesus Christ, His priestly sacrifice on our behalf, we believers have had our sins forgiven (Col.2:13; 2Pet.1:19; 1Jn.2:12); as a result of this victory of victories of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we believers will share in His millennial kingdom (Rom.5:17; 2Tim.2:12; Rev.5:10; 20:6). Since as the result of belonging to our High Priest we too are priests, we have the right to function in this new priesthood in a special way (i.e., with direct access now to the throne of grace without the need of any intermediary in offering prayer to the Father and the Son: Jn.14:14; Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.4:16), and we have the responsibility of carrying our own crosses for Him (Matt.10:38; 16:24; Mk.8:34; 10:31; Lk.9:23; 14:27), and of making proper sacrifices for Him as well in living our lives for Him as He desires (Rom.6:13; 6:16; 6:19; 1Cor.6:20).

Therefore I entreat you by God's mercy, brothers, to dedicate your bodies as a living **sacrifice**, well-pleasing to God – [this is] your "priestly-service" spiritually performed.
Romans 12:1

And you yourselves [too] are being built up (i.e., by the Holy Spirit) into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood for the **offering of spiritual sacrifices** well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ.
1st Peter 2:5

Since as the result of belonging to the King of Kings we too are royalty, we have the right to function in this new royal family in a special way (i.e., exploiting His victory by winning the crowns of reward promised to those who fight this fight valiantly: Ps.68:18; Is.33:23; 52:12; Eph.4:7-8; Heb.10:35-36; Rev.2:26-27), and we have the responsibility of comporting ourselves in a way that behooves those who belong to His royal family, not as those under the now defunct Law.

Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment **of the law**.
Romans 13:10

If you really keep the **royal law** found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.
James 2:8 NIV

But you are a chosen people, a *royal* priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1st Peter 2:9 NIV

Kenosis and the Blood of Christ:

(3) [The gospel] which is about [God's] Son, the One who was born of the seed of David according to *His human nature* (lit., "flesh"), (4) and demonstrated to be God's Son by the power of the Spirit of Holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 1:3-4

Jesus Christ has always been God (Jn.1:1-2; 5:18; 10:30; 10:33; Rom.9:5; 1Cor.8:6; Col.2:9; Heb.1:3),⁶ and as this verse shows He became fully and genuinely human as well when He came into this world "born of the seed of David" (Jn.1:14; cf. Matt.2:1-11; Lk.2:7). That God should take on true humanity is astounding and difficult in its own right to comprehend – since we human beings cannot really fully understand this side of heaven the transcendent magnitude of the divine. Understanding the self-imposed limitations under which our Lord labored during the first advent thus requires a special measure of explanation.

(9) I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance in Jesus was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (10) I came to be in the Spirit on the Lord's day and heard behind me a loud voice like that of a trumpet, (11) saying, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. (12) So I turned around to see [the source of] the voice that was speaking to me, and when I had turned around, I saw seven golden lampstands. (13) And in the middle of the lampstands was what looked like a man, dressed in a long robe with a golden belt tied around His waist. (14) And His head and his hair were as white as wool or as snow, and His eyes were like a fiery flame, (15) and His feet were like white-hot bronze when super-heated in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. (16) And He held seven stars in His right hand, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. And His face shone like the sun in its glory. (17) And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. Then He put His right hand on me, saying, "Don't be afraid. It is I, the First and the Last, (18) even the Living One. And although I died, behold, I am alive forever and ever! Indeed, I possess the keys to death and Hades."

Revelation 1:9-18

In the verses above, we see that after His victory on the cross, after His resurrection, ascension, session at the Father's right hand, and glorification "with the glory I had with You before the world began" (Jn.17:5), the two natures of Jesus Christ, divine and human, exist in perfect

⁶ See BB 4A: Christology, section I.1, "Jesus Christ is truly Divine".

harmony without any self-imposed limits between the two (i.e., "*kenosis*" was only necessary before the cross). Furthermore, before the incarnation, Jesus already "existed in the very form of God" (Phil.2:5), being "with God" as God from before the beginning (Jn.1:1-2; Col.1:15), creating the world (Jn.1:3; Col.1:16), and maintaining it by His "word of power" (Heb.1:3; Col.1:17). Only during the first advent, before He had died for the sins of the world, was there a need for our Savior as the God-man to restrict and be restricted in the use of His deity to benefit His humanity. Simply put, had there been no such restriction, Jesus' human life before the cross would not have been genuine, lacking the suffering and trouble the rest of us go through, and this would have invalidated His sacrifice – just as if we were presently in possession of all of the benefits and powers we will possess at the resurrection, the contest in which we are engaging with the object of winning the rewards that complement our Lord's victory would hardly be a "fair fight" (to use a loose analogy).

(5) You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. (6) Since He already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was [certainly] not something He thought He had to grasp for. (7) Yet in spite of this [co-equal divinity He already possessed], He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, [and was] born in the likeness of men. (8) He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all].
Philippians 2:5-8

As a human being, Jesus had to eat and drink and sleep as we all do. He became tired as we all do (Jn.4:6). But He never called upon His deity to help Himself before the victory of the cross was completed and eternal salvation accomplished. He did not turn stones into bread when terrifically hungry, although He could have (Matt.4:3-4; Lk.4:3-4). He did not cast the devil into hell for tempting Him, nor did He call for legions of angels to rescue Him when arrested, although these things were easily in His power as God to do (Matt.26:53). Without His suffering as we all suffer – and beyond what any other human being has ever suffered – there would have been no cross and no salvation. Christ's depriving Himself in taking on unglorified humanity in this way during His first advent was *not* an emptying or voiding of His deity. That is impossible. God cannot cease to be God. But Jesus, in His humanity, did refrain from utilizing the power that His deity possesses. He "limited Himself" from aiding His humanity with His deity. This self-limitation or *kenosis* (as it is called in theology) was necessary for Him to be our perfect sacrifice in order to take away the sins of the world.⁷

(19) For it was [God's] good pleasure for the fulfillment [of His plan] to reside entirely in [Christ], (20) and so through Him to reconcile everything to Himself, having made peace through Him, through the blood of His cross, whether things on earth, or things in heaven.
Colossians 1:19-20

Through "the blood of His cross" we believers have been reconciled to the Father and now have eternal life, an impossible event without our Lord becoming human and living a perfect,

⁷ See BB 4A: Christology, section I.5.e, "The Hypostatic Union and *Kenosis*".

genuinely human life up until the point of completing His immense and immeasurable sacrifice on our behalf in dying for our sins.

He made Him who had no [personal] experience of sinning [to be] sin (i.e., a sin offering) for us, so that we might have (lit., “become”) God's righteousness in Him.
2nd Corinthians 5:21

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, in order that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wound you are healed.
1st Peter 2:24

Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf is His essential priestly service upon which all else depends. The cross was the means by which He completed His mission and fulfilled the plan of God. All that is and ever will be in this world and in the one to come is founded upon the Rock of Jesus Christ, who He is and what He has done for us. Jesus, whose very Name means "Savior", had to become a human being in order to save us from our sins by offering Himself on the cross for what we have done. As a result of taking on true humanity and suffering as we all do in this life (only beyond anything we can ever really understand even before His spiritual death on the cross for our sins: Heb.5:8), our Lord is able to "sympathize" with us (Heb.5:2; cf. Heb.2:14-18), to have compassion for us on account of understanding first hand and experientially what we are going through in this life. Having bought us from the grave with His blood, His death for all sin in Calvary's darkness on the cross, our High Priest now stands ready to hear our petitions and to advocate on our behalf (Rom.8:34; Heb.7:25; cf. Job 16:19; Jn.14:13-14; 1Tim.2:5), having opened up access for us directly to the Father so that we no longer have need of any other priests to act as intermediaries for us (Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.4:16) – for that is what priests do, mediate between God and man – having made us "a kingdom of priests", royal priests to Him and to the Father (1Pet.2:5; 2:9; Rev.1:6; 5:9-10; 20:6), with all prior barriers to access swept away by the cross (Eph.2:13-18; cf. Col.2:13-14). Our Lord's priesthood, His high priesthood, is thus unique in many ways. Since He alone was without sin and therefore did not need to sacrifice for any sin of His own (of which He had none: Heb.4:15), He could sacrifice Himself for us all, "that one should die for all" (Jn.11:49-52; 18:14; cf. 1Jn.2:2).

(23) Now the others who have become priests are [of necessity] many since they are prevented from remaining [in office] because of their mortality. (24) But He, [Jesus Christ], because He abides forever, possesses the priesthood irrevocably. (25) For this reason He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, since He lives forever making intercession for them. (26) ***This is just the sort of High Priest we needed***, holy, without fault, without imperfection, completely separated from sinners, and having ascended higher than the heavens [into God's presence]. (27) Unlike those [other] high priests, [Jesus] has no need of making sacrifice day by day, first on behalf of His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. For this He did once and for all when He offered Himself [as a sacrifice].
Hebrews 7:23-27

Jesus' unique high priesthood was absolutely necessary for us to be saved. As the special High

Priest who would not need "to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for the people" (Heb.5:3), because of His sinless virgin birth (Gal.4:4-5), and because of His sinless life thereafter (Jn.8:46), in His humanity Jesus Christ was qualified as no other human being ever was – as no other human being could ever be – to be our sacrifice: since He had no sin and thus did not need to make any sacrifice on His own behalf, He was free to offer Himself as our sacrifice, our Substitute, to take away our sins, to be, that is, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (Jn.1:29; cf. Jn.1:36; 1Pet.1:19; Rev.5:6-12).

"Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"
Revelation 5:13b NKJV

Spiritual Regression and Spiritual Growth:

(12) [It is] not that I have already gotten [what I am striving for], nor that I have already completed [my course]. Rather, I am continuing to pursue [the prize] in hopes of fully acquiring it – [this prize for whose acquisition] I was myself acquired by Christ Jesus. (13) Brethren, I do not consider that I have already acquired it. This one thing only [do I keep in mind]. Forgetting what lies behind me [on the course] and straining towards the [course] ahead, (14) I continue to drive straight for the tape, towards the prize to which God has called us from the beginning [of our race] in Christ Jesus. (15) So as many as are [spiritually] mature, let us have this attitude (i.e., of focusing on our spiritual advance and reward and not getting hung up on what lies behind: vv.13-14), and if in any matter your attitude is off-center, God will reveal that to you (i.e., assuming you are mature and are advancing as you should). (16) But with respect to the progress you have made, keep on advancing *in the same way*!
Philippians 3:12-16

(6) So then, *exactly as you* [originally] received Christ Jesus as [your] Lord, *be walking* in Him [in the very same way], (7) rooted and built up in him, established in the faith just as you were taught, overflowing with thanksgiving.
Colossians 2:6-7

It is difficult to stand still in the Christian life. For this reason, as in the two passages above, our experience as believers in Jesus Christ is often described as a race or a journey (e.g., Job 23:11; Ps.1:1-2; 16:11; 23:3; 25:4; 32:8; 37:5-6; 37:34; 119:9; 119:35; 119:105; 139:24; Prov.4:18; 10:17; 12:28; Is.26:6-7; 48:17; Jer.21:8; Matt.7:13-14; 16:24-25; Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23; Jn.14:6; Acts 20:24; 1Cor.9:26; Gal.5:7; 2Tim.4:7; Heb.12:1; 12:12-13), and this explains also why in both passages – and throughout scripture – we believers are continually encouraged to keep moving forward, to keep exercising our faith in growth, progress and production following the very same pattern by which we entered in upon this sacred pilgrimage to Zion in the first place.

(5) Happy is everyone whose strength is in You. Their hearts are set on the highways [of pilgrimage to Zion]. (6) As they pass through the [dry] valley of Bachah (i.e., the

wilderness of life), they make it a place of springs. Even the early rains enwrap it with [their] blessings. (7) They go from strength to strength, until they appear before God in Zion.

Psalm 84:5-7

We believers are transients on this earth, pilgrims, strangers and sojourners, on our way to a better place (Lev.25:23; 1Chron.29:15; Ps.39:12; 119:19; Heb.11:13-16; 1Pet.1:1; 2:11). This world is temporary. This world is imperfect. And we are, in these present bodies, temporary and imperfect as well. But through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us, we have eternal life, and it is in the hope of that eternal life that we are sacrificing for Him in response, anticipating the resurrection and a good report before Him on that day.

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

1st Timothy 4:10 LSB

As long as we keep this sojourner perspective, not loving the world (Jas.4:4; 1Jn2:15; cf. Jn.15:18-19), but loving the Lord and keeping our focus on the things to come, the things above, all is well (Col.3:1-2; Phil.4:8). As long as we are moving forward spiritually daily, denying ourselves (i.e., focusing on pleasing our Lord in eternity and not on pleasing ourselves in this world: 1Jn.2:17), picking up our crosses (i.e., staying true to our commitment: Lk.14:26-33), and following Jesus Christ (i.e., putting Him first: Phil.1:21), by growing spiritually through attention to the truth (2Pet.3:18), passing the tests that strengthen our faith (Rom.5:3-5; Jas.1:2-4), and helping other believers do the same through ministry (1Pet.4:10), then we need have no fear of backsliding spiritually.

"And he who was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceptiveness of wealth stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that he becomes unproductive."

Matthew 13:22

(18) "And others were sown among the thorns. These are those who heard the Word, (19) but the worries of life and the deceptiveness of wealth, and the lust for other things grow up [over them like thorns and weeds] and stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that they become unproductive."

Mark 4:18-19

"And as to that [seed] which fell among the thorns, these are they who have heard the Word, but who are stunted by worries and by wealth and by the pleasures of this life with the result that they do not bear a full crop to harvest."

Luke 8:14

Worries, wealth, and the general "noise" of this world can be very distracting, so that beyond all argument it is "easier" to sit on the sidelines than it is to engage in the struggle which constitutes the Christian life well-lived to the glory and good pleasure of Jesus Christ – easier, that is, for the

sin nature inherent in us all. But, given all the negatives of doing things the wrong way, it is also absolutely the case that doing things the right way is the only path to true happiness both in the short run of this temporary life and in the eternal one to come. To give in to the weeds or to fight to keep them chopped back instead is the challenge faced by every Christian in this world – or at least it should be for those few Laodiceans who have even deigned to take it up in the first place. "Easy listening" Christianity (i.e., attending a church where there is no teaching and assuming that this suffices in carrying out one's responsibility to the Lord) is, sadly, the default setting for the vast majority of believers who are even nominally engaged. The main problem with being lukewarm in that way, an approach which our Lord despises (Rev.3:15-16), is that it makes a Christian vulnerable to spiritual regression. Once momentum is lost, the devil has less trouble deflecting us from the right path and even tempting us to head backwards. There is opposition to be overcome on the right road which leads upward (Prov.15:24); without positive momentum on our climb and under pressure which is not properly handled, backsliding is all but inevitable. The more one resists the Spirit and rejects the truth, the less open to the Lord that person's heart becomes. This is called in scripture, the hardening of the heart.⁸

Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.

Proverbs 28:14 NIV

They knew about God, but they neither honored Him as God nor thanked Him. Instead, they gave themselves over to [the] vanity [of this world] in their speculations, and their senseless hearts were filled with darkness.

Romans 1:21

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do with their minds emptied [of the truth]. (18) They are darkened in their thinking, separated from the life of God because of this [willful] ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts [against the truth], (19) who, when once they have lost all sensitivity [for what is right], have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. (20) This is not how you learned to follow Christ.

Ephesians 4:17-20

Today if you hear His voice, Don't harden your hearts as they did at the provocation [at Meribah].

Hebrews 3:8

Our Lord gives us in the parable of the Sower the four major life-courses for the entire human race. We can choose to be 1) those who reject the truth (the seed which falls on the hard-packed ground and never germinates: the outcome of unbelief and subsequent condemnation); 2) those

⁸ See BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.2.d, "Phase One Hardening of the Heart: Darkening of the Truth"; the Ichthys series: Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart; and Hebrews Chapter 3, under "Harden the Heart".

who believe initially but then fall away (the seed which falls in shallow soil then withers from the heat of testing: the outcome of apostasy and subsequent condemnation); 3) those who believe but then fail to respond to the mandates of the Christian life of growth, progress and production (the seed which falls among the thorns so that, while it doesn't die, it produces no crop: the outcome of lukewarmness and/or the sin unto death [depending upon how negative individual choices and behavior happen to be]); or, what our Lord desires from each and every one of us, 4) those who believe and respond to our Lord in doing what He wants us to do (the seed which produces 30, 60 or a 100 fold: the outcome of eternal reward commensurate with our effort in this life).

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case – the things that have to do with salvation.

Hebrews 6:9 NIV

As with any group of genuine believer, it is fair to assume that while there may be an overall trend, representatives of all three later types (and occasionally even some unbelievers of type number one above) may be present in the fellowship. Judging from Paul's approach throughout this epistle and from the citation above, it seems clear that in his estimate the trend was towards category number three, the majority of those to whom he wrote being stuck in the weeds/thorns or headed in that direction. He was also very worried that once headed backward it was only a short step from category three (lukewarm and/or licentious) to category two (loss of salvation in apostasy – or at least the sin unto death for those who did not slip quite that far). No doubt there were also some believers in Jerusalem in the good, fourth category, and Paul was counting on them accepting this letter and its content, then distributing it and using it warn and encourage the others as a major means of reversing the dangerous trends the epistle addresses.

(31) He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took (32) Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Matthew 13:31-32 NIV

(26) He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. (27) Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. (28) All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. (29) As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Mark 4:26-29

Just as spiritual growth is a process that doesn't happen over night but occurs imperceptibly over time, so also believers do not generally regress from a peak of spiritual maturity instantly, so that the very fact of their trend of distancing themselves from the Lord may be hard to notice on a day by day basis – by others or by themselves. But it does happen, and just as going uphill is harder than going downhill, it is easier to regress in the spiritual life than it is to progress.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."

Matthew 7:13 NIV

(11) We have much to say about this [subject of Christ's spiritual death and priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. (12) And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], [instead] you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God's truth are [all over] again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food!
Hebrews 5:11-14

Many of the Jerusalem believers who had relapsed spiritually may not have fully realized it, their consciences having become weakened through the process of hardening. But by returning to the Law, falsely interpreted and administered by unbelievers, they had made it very clear to anyone observing them that they had indeed backslid and dangerously so.

One of the great values of studying the book of Hebrews is something which much scripture shares: we who read and listen and study in the Spirit are encouraged by the courageous faith of believers who do what is right; and by considering those who behave in the opposite way we are warned of the consequences of heading in the wrong direction and reverting to loving the world instead of loving the Lord. There is much of both in Hebrews. The great advantage of considering the second category of believer is that we can feel with godly fear the horror of slipping away from the Lord – without actually doing so ourselves and without suffering any of the consequent divine discipline. That is blessed . . . and spiritually salutary as well.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.
1st Corinthians 10:11 NIV

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?
Hebrews 12:25 NIV

Just as in linguistic analysis, much can be understood about the positive qualities of a word by studying its negated version and its usage (i.e., unfriendly tells us a lot about what the word friendly means), so the negative example of the spiritual situation of the Jerusalem believers described in the book of Hebrews informs us greatly about what the positive and polar opposite would be: studying the wrong way and its consequences also informs our understanding of the right way and its blessed results, and should, therefore, motivate us greatly to do what is right in the eyes of our Lord and eschew what is wrong, choosing spiritual growth, progress and production for Him over compromising with the world for ephemeral security or pleasure (as many of Paul's intended audience were doing).

II. Translation

(1) For every [other] high priest selected from among mankind is appointed on behalf of mankind in regard to all matters relating to God, so that he may offer gifts and sacrifices [to God] on behalf of [their] sins, (2) being able to sympathize with those who are acting in ignorance or being deceived (or "deceiving themselves"; lit., "wandering"), since he himself is [also] beset with weakness (i.e., possessing a sin nature); (3) and because of this weakness, he must offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for the people. (4) Also, no one takes this honor [of being high priest] upon himself; only one who is called by God [to serve in this way] just as Aaron was.

(5) In the same way Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, [rather, God the Father appointed Him, even] the One who said to Him, "You are My Son; today I have begotten you", (6) just as He likewise says [of Him] in another verse, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek", (7) [where He is also speaking to Jesus our High Priest,] who in the days of His flesh[ly life] (i.e., while He was on earth prior to the resurrection), having offered up prayers and petitions with powerful shouting and with tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and having been hearkened to on account of His devoutness, (8) although being [God's one and only] Son, nevertheless He came to understand [firsthand in His humanity] from what He suffered [what] obedience to God [truly is] (i.e., what it takes for a human being to be fully obedient to God), (9) and, once He was perfected (i.e., had perfectly completed His course), He became the source of eternal salvation for all who are obedient to Him (i.e., believers), (10) having been previously proclaimed by God [the Father Himself] High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

(11) We have much to say about this [subject of Christ's spiritual death and priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. (12) And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], [instead] you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God's truth are [all over] again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food! (13) For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant. (14) Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:1-14

III. Summary and Paraphrase

Jesus Christ is our true High Priest so that His spiritual sacrifice is the only true sacrifice acceptable to the Father. You ought to know this by now, but you have reverted.

Even high priests under the Mosaic Law make shadow sacrifices which represent what Jesus was going to do for us, and those priests know what it is like to be under pressure because they are sinners by nature just like us. That is why they have to offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for the people, even though they are "high priests" who symbolize Christ and the sacrifice which He has now made. Even so, even human priests were called to that office by God and did not choose that honor by their own will. In

Christ's case, His commission came directly from God the Father, just as scripture proves (Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4).

The sacrifice of the cross, the "blood of Christ", is beyond our complete understanding, but Christ endured it – along with all the unimaginable pain and suffering it entailed – and was delivered through it because of His perfect life and His perfect accomplishment of all that the Father asked of Him. Therefore Christ has genuine human experience – NOT of sin, since He was sinless and had to be sacrificed for us – but of what it means to pay the price for the sins of the world. And because of that greatest of victories, Christ has opened up the door of salvation for us – if we believe in Him and if we stay faithful to Him – and that is where you are falling down through your indulgence in Gnostic fantasies, sinful behavior, and return to the dead works of the Law. You should take note that it is as the result of Christ's actual and efficacious sacrifice for sin – a sacrifice that is now accomplished and complete – that the Father appointed Him as the unique High Priest, the only One capable of providing the salvation which the earthly priests merely symbolized in their regime of animal sacrifice.

By your actions in turning back to the Law and turning aside to sin and fantasy, you demonstrate that you have forgotten these basic truths, making it impossible for us to teach you more advanced principles. Shame on you! By this time you ought to be teaching others the truth but instead you are in desperate need of being taught again the most basic principles of our Christian faith. You have gone back to being spiritual babies, not yet weaned to solid doctrinal fare. For everyone who still needs their mother's milk is a baby – in spiritual terms, someone who has forgotten that our true righteousness comes from our faith in Christ, not from the works of Law or Gnostic combat. The solid food you should be craving, the deeper doctrinal truths that lead to spiritual advance and genuine service to the Lord, are not for babies but for those who are spiritually mature, those, that is, who through consistent growth and application of the truth have trained their faculties to perceive what is good and right to do and what is not – and who then act accordingly. But you are doing precisely the opposite.

IV. Verse by Verse Commentary

Verses One through Three

(1) For every [other] high priest selected from among mankind is appointed on behalf of mankind in regard to all matters relating to God, so that he may offer gifts and sacrifices [to God] on behalf of [their] sins, (2) being able to sympathize with those who are acting in ignorance or being deceived (or "deceiving themselves"; lit., "wandering"), since he himself is [also] beset with weakness (i.e., possessing a sin nature); (3) and because of this weakness, he must offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for the people.
Hebrews 5:1-3

For: The Greek conjunction *gar*, translated "for" above, tells us that what follows in the passage above is an explanation of what went before in the previous chapter (there were no chapter

divisions in the original text as we have seen). So this conjunction tells us that we have a right to "approach the throne of grace" and boldly petition God the Father to request His mercy and grace in our time of need (Heb.4:16), because Jesus Christ bought that right for us with His blood, that is, through His spiritual death wherein He paid for all of our sins. Thus our Lord's efficacious sacrifice upon which the entire plan of God rests, the fundamental and foundational service of His high priesthood, is superior in every way to the purely symbolic and ritual duties of those chosen to be high priests under the Law of shadows. By comparing His eternal and perfect priesthood to the necessarily flawed ones of "every other high priest", we see clearly how much better our Lord's priesthood is in every way, superior in its own right, since it never will end and since it actually accomplished what the shadow rituals of the others only taught, and superior in its effects for us, since through it He has taken away our sins and opened up for us the blessed access we now possess unto the throne of grace of God the Father Himself.

On behalf of Mankind: Priests, as we saw in our introduction above, are essentially intermediaries between God and man. Because man is sinful and God is perfect, such mediation is absolutely essential if there is to be any contact between the two parties whatsoever – otherwise on the one hand any human being having any contact with the Almighty would immediately die (Ex.33:20), and on the other hand in the absence of contact through effective mediation we would all eventually die in our sins (Jn.8:24).

(5) For as God is One, so there is [only] One Mediator between God and Man, Christ Jesus in His humanity, (6a) who gave Himself as a ransom for all [mankind] . . .
1st Timothy 2:5-6a

No human being in the flesh has ever seen God (Jn.1:18; 6:46; 1Jn.4:12; cf. Col.1:15; 1Tim.1:17), but God has provided us with a go-between, an intermediary, a "daysman" (Job 9:33 KJV): Jesus Christ our Lord. No human being in the flesh has ever seen Jesus' divinity on this earth, but, since the garden of Eden, our Lord has always provided the necessary presence we need to mediate the truth and to bring us salvation, first in the form of the Angel of the Lord, and with the incarnation, the God-man Himself, visible to us in His humanity without His divine nature being revealed.

And the Word became flesh and tented among us. And we beheld His glory, a glory like that of a one and only Son from [the] Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14

That is why all the examples in the past of our Lord appearing to believers in the Old Testament, "Christophanies", as they are called, are described as "angels", because *the* Messenger of the Father (for that is what the word "angel" means) is *the* Angel of the Lord (e.g., Gen.16:13; Jdg.13:20-23).⁹

(19) What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till

⁹ See BB 1: Theology, section II.C.3, "Appearances of Christ in the Old Testament"; and BB 4: Christology, section I.5.b, "Old Testament Appearances of Jesus Christ".

the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed *through angels* by the hand of a mediator. (20) Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one.

Galatians 3:19-20 NKJV

Mediation is at the heart of the plan of God. Mediation is God providing us with a go-between, a Substitute, to make peace between us and Him, to remove the hostility arising from sin which acts as a barrier separating man from God ever since the fall of Adam and Eve (Eph.2:14-18; cf. Col.2:14). We human beings are hopeless and helpless, thrice dead (possessing a sin nature from birth, sinning ever thereafter, and mortal, bound for the lake of fire absent miraculous divine intervention). From birth, we were all thus in desperate need of a deliverance only God could provide. Nothing we could ever do, no human works, would ever be sufficient to mollify God's wrath for our sins and sinfulness. Indeed, at the last judgment, unbelievers will be condemned on the basis those very "works", that is, the human good they thought to do to propitiate God in the same vein as Cain (Rev.20:11-15). But all such sacrifices are abominable to God. Only a perfect sacrifice which removed all of our sins could ever be sufficient. None of us could accomplish that, and God cannot have any contact with sin. What we needed was a third party to come between us and to make peace between us by providing that perfect sacrifice. What we needed was a perfect Mediator, a perfect Priest, who would be capable of offering the sacrifice which would propitiate the demands of God's perfect character which called for judgment on all human sin. What we needed was someone to reconcile us to God, to make peace between us and Him by removing the barrier of sin which divided us. What we needed was Jesus Christ.¹⁰

(8) But God commends His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (9) So how much more is it not true now, after we have been rendered righteous [through faith] in His blood, that we shall be saved from the [coming] wrath through Him? (10) For if when we were His enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, how much more is it not true [now], since we have been reconciled [to Him through Jesus' death], that we will be saved by His life? (11) And not only that, but we even flaunt [our new relationship] with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained this reconciliation.

Romans 5:8-11

(18) And all things come from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, (19) for that God was [and is] in Christ making overtures of reconciliation between the world and Himself – not taking their transgressions into account – and has entrusted us with this message (lit., "word") of reconciliation. (20) As ambassadors of Christ, as though God were urging you through us, we beg you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God!

2nd Corinthians 5:18-20

¹⁰ The doctrines of unlimited atonement, the blood of Christ, the spiritual death of Christ, propitiation, redemption, justification and reconciliation are covered in BB 4A: Christology, section II, "The Saving Work of Christ".

(14) For [Jesus] Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity, (15) by discharging the Law of the commandments and its requirements with His [own] body, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind]. (17) For when He had come (i.e., the 1st advent), He proclaimed the gospel of peace to you who were far away [from God], and peace to those who were near. (18) For it is through Him that we both have our access to the Father by means of one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14-18

This is what our true High Priest did for us, not merely portraying these blessed truths symbolically as the Levitical high priests did, but actually saving us by dying for our sins. This all being the case, how offensive to the Lord must it be when believers turn back from such inimitable grace to the works of their own hands instead, insulting the incomparable sacrifice of Jesus Christ by suggesting that their own efforts are superior? That is what the Jerusalem believers were doing in returning to the now defunct Law.

Gifts and Sacrifices: Under the Law, there were many different types of gifts and sacrifices offered for a variety of purposes and on a variety of occasions (e.g., the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus are devoted exclusively to these issues – although this is by far not the only place in the Pentateuch or the rest of the Old and New Testaments where these matters are discussed). The Law, properly understood, is entirely symbolic of heavenly things, as Paul will point out later on in Hebrews:

(4) For if [Jesus] were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; (5) who serve the *copy* and *shadow* of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the *pattern* shown you on the mountain" (Ex.25:40).

Hebrews 8:4-5 NKJV

Where "gifts and sacrifices" are concerned, without exception these are meant to symbolize some aspect of Jesus' perfect person and His sacrifice for us on the cross, dying for the sins of the world.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

John 1:29 NKJV

In general, all of the offerings presented under the Law can be broken down into the two categories which Paul gives us here: "gifts and sacrifices". "Gifts", represents the Hebrew word/category *minchah* (מִנְחָה), literally meaning (lexicographers surmise) "a present"; a *minchah*, broadly speaking, refers to anything given which was then intended to be used or consumed mainly by the priests, and it usually meant offerings of grain (Lev.2:1-16; 6:14-23).

"Sacrifices", on the other hand, represents the Hebrew word/category *qorban* (קֹרְבָן), literally meaning "something brought near" (i.e., to the altar for sacrifice); in essence, a *qorban* refers to anything dedicated to the Lord and marked for death by sacrifice (Lev.1:2-17; 3:1-6:13; cf. Matt.15:5; Mk.7:11). Of course, the above simplifies the particulars greatly. The precise procedures to be followed in all of these offerings was and remains a matter of great interest to students of the Law.¹¹ The point that we need to keep in mind here – and in all the discussions of particulars of the Law coming up later in Hebrews – is the one made above: every single aspect of the Law was symbolic and in one way or another was meant to reference Jesus Christ, His perfect person and His efficacious sacrifice for us.¹² This symbolism may be seen with great clarity in the very first sacrifice established by the Law, namely, the Passover (Ex.12:1-29; Num. 9:1-14; Deut. 16:1-8; Ezek. 45:21-25).

Then they shall eat the flesh [of the lamb] on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.
Exodus 12:8 NKJV

Passover, as we have seen in the past, is the precursor of our communion, where the elements are different today (bread and wine which require no blood sacrifice or elaborate preparation), but still symbolically represented faith in the person and the work of Christ (e.g., Jn.1:29; 1:36).¹³ Today, drinking the wine represents our faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ, that is, which covers our sins, coming from our Substitute who died for us, while eating the bread represents our faith in His perfect person, the sinless God-man who was fit and acceptable to be our Substitute and to bear the sins of the world. In both cases, eating and drinking represent our acceptance by non-meritorious faith of these eternal truths of the gospel: i.e., there is nothing meritorious about eating and drinking but these actions do represent acceptance and "taking in" of what is offered to us. On the other hand, participating in rituals without understanding is worse than not participating at all, and worst of all is participating in rituals whose symbolism runs contrary to the truth we profess to believe: Jesus had already died for their sins, so that going back to the Jewish rituals which proclaimed a Savior yet to come (as opposed to communion which represents His work for us already completed) was a terrible scandal in the true etymological sense of the word: a stumbling block to others who might be led into participation in this hypocrisy (cf. 1Cor.8:10).

¹¹ These rituals are "explained" by the six orders (volumes) of the *Mishnah*, a Jewish commentary on the Law (passed down and developed before 200 A.D.), which forms the text to which the *Talmuds* in turn provide commentary: 63 tractates/volumes of the "Babylonian Talmud" dating to ca. the 6th century A.D., and 4 "*seders*" /multi-volumes of the "Jerusalem" or "Palestinian Talmud", dating to the 4th century A.D.

¹² One important work on this subject is that of E.W. Hengstenberg, *The Christology of the Old Testament* (trans. by R Keith: 1835–1839).

¹³ See SR 5: Judgment, Restoration, and Replacement, section II.8.c.I.1, "Passover"; BB 4A: Christology, section II.5.f.3.1, "The Meaning of Communion"; and BB 6B: Ecclesiology: the Study of the Church, section II.C.3.a, "Communion".

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death
(already accomplished) till He comes.
1st Corinthians 11:26 NKJV

Ignorant and Deceived:

(1) For every [other] high priest selected from among mankind is appointed on behalf of mankind in regard to all matters relating to God, so that he may offer gifts and sacrifices [to God] on behalf of [their] sins, (2) being able to sympathize with those who are **acting in ignorance or being deceived** (or "deceiving themselves"; lit., "wandering"), since he himself is [also] beset with weakness (i.e., possessing a sin nature).
Hebrews 5:1-2

"What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray?"
Matthew 18:12 CSB

The words translated "astray" and "stray" above are forms of the same word which is translated in our context of Hebrews 5:2 as "deceived", namely, the Greek verb *planao*, whose root means "wander, err, go astray". The English word "planet" comes from this root, and planets are so named because, unlike the stars (which follow an easily predictable pattern in their motions across the night sky), they have movements which seem, to the untrained astronomer, very erratic. Planets (in a phenomenological sense), sheep, and people are all capable of wandering about and thus of getting lost. But in the case of people, if such straying, erring or wandering occurs through the agency of someone else who is trying to provoke it, that would qualify as being deceived. When it comes to sin (as opposed to getting physically lost), the sin nature, the devil and his demons, and the entire world system Satan has put in place are inevitably behind all such lapses in one way or another. While we who are growing in and following Jesus Christ certainly strive to avoid all "high-handed" sinning (out of respect for our Lord and our desire to avoid His displeasure and divine discipline), sinning, as we have seen many times, is something human beings inevitably do – even believers.

"For there is no one who does not sin."
1st Kings 8:46 ESV (cf. 2Chron.6:36)

Any believer who has lived in this world a while and made any spiritual progress whatsoever will, if honest about it, acknowledge the truth that sin is ubiquitous and subtle. We who are carrying our crosses in the footsteps of Jesus Christ endeavor to stumble as little as possible – but we all stumble (Jas.3:2). Even the high priests did so – all of them, with only one exception: the unique High Priest of all high priests who had to be sinless in order to be the acceptable sacrifice who would save us from our sins. Other high priests had to perform sacrifice on their own behalf and could sympathize with our need for the same. Jesus Christ suffered what we do – only without sin (Heb.4:15). And as such He was fit to die for us, even as with His genuine human experience He can also fully sympathize with us (Heb.4:15).

In the Law, a majority of the sacrifices were ordained for sins of ignorance (Lev.4:1-6:7), because sinning "with a high hand", that is, being in full knowledge that what one was doing was sinful and arrogantly doing it anyway, was often punishable by death (Num15:30-36; cf. Lev.24:10-23). However, between complete ignorance on the one hand and absolute arrogance on the other is the very common situation of believers being deceived – or deceiving themselves.

(1) Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (2) The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, (3) but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' " (4) "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (or "gods"), knowing good and evil." (6) When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.
Genesis 3:1-6 NIV

Eve was deceived, but as we see here, in the process of all deception there is a subtle appeal to our egos which acts to draw us into the sinful action we would otherwise eschew. Would Eve have eaten the fruit were it not for the false promise of their "becoming like God" or "like gods" (*'elohiym* means either in Hebrew).¹⁴

(7) Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (8) Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (9) But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" (10) He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (11) And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (12) The man said, "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." (13) Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."
Genesis 3:7-13 NIV

Eve's response to the Lord is absolutely true, pure and simple. She was deceived as to the consequences of her actions; otherwise she would not have done what she did. Adam, however, was not deceived. He knew what he was doing in choosing Eve over the Lord – for that is exactly what he did in throwing in his lot with his wife about to be expelled from the garden as opposed to remaining alone with the Lord inside of the garden. What should not be missed in the paragraph above is that Eve, who was deceived, answers the Lord in an entirely straightforward way, recognizing that nothing can be hidden from the Lord. But Adam, who had not been

¹⁴ This passage is covered extensively in BB 3A: The Purpose, Creation and Fall of Man, section IV, "The Fall"; and in Peter's Epistles #27: Three False Doctrines that Threaten Faith.

deceived, being now sinful after eating the fruit, attempts to justify his action by blaming his wife **and** God: "**The woman** that **you** put here with me!" Being now under the influence of the sin nature, Adam seeks to deceive the Lord, but only manages to deceive himself, as if the Lord didn't know the truth. In the end, all deception, even when technically passive from one point of view (as in the serpent successfully deceiving Eve) or technically active (as in Adam attempting to deceive the Lord by suggesting that he was not himself culpable), is in truth self-deception. That is because God can never be deceived, so that whether we allow someone else to influence us into doing something wrong or try to do so to someone else, in either case we are ignoring the indisputable fact that all wrong is contrary to God's law (1Jn.3:4), and that God will never be in any doubt about the fact that wrong is being done or promoted. Whether subtle (as in allowing oneself to be deceived or deceiving oneself through "rationalization", e.g.) or more straightforward (as in deceiving others), behind all deceit lies arrogance, the pride of assigning to oneself the right to violate law and the rights of others for personal advantage. Pride, arrogance, is the original sin (the devil wanted to replace God, Eve wanted to be like God, Adam assumed he could "fix things" without God). And since pride/arrogance always runs counter to the truth, since it always involves creatures with free will in dangerous and disastrous anti-God courses of action, pride/arrogance is the ultimate in self-deception.

(12) "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, O son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, O you who laid the nations low. (13) For you said in your heart, 'I will ascend heavenward. I will set my throne above the stars of God. And I will take my seat on the mount of assembly on the sides of the north. (14) I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will be like the Most High God'. (15) But indeed you will be brought down to Sheol, to the sides of the pit."
Isaiah 14:12-15

Instead of becoming like a god, Eve became spiritually dead. Instead of rescuing Eve by reconciling her to God, Adam condemned himself. Instead of replacing the one true God, Satan doomed himself to the lake of fire. All sin is self-deception regardless of how high-handed and arrogant it is, because all sin willfully ignores God's omniscience, omnipotence, and absolute righteousness which can never and will never bend to any lie or act of rebellion. The sooner we believers take this truth to heart, the happier and spiritually safer we shall be.

But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving (*planao*) and being deceived (*planao*).
2nd Timothy 3:13 NKJV

As arrogant as the behavior of the exodus generation and all later iterations of "this generation" was and is – as in the case of those in Jerusalem who were embracing that same deadly pattern of rebellion (as we saw in our treatment of Hebrews 3:10) – in turning away from the truth, abandoning the Lord to chase after the myth-happiness of this world instead, embracing the lie is, as the passage above affirms, not only deceptive but self-deceptive ("causing others to wander from the truth and being led into the same wandering away from the truth oneself"). All deceivers have first deceived themselves. Hardening one's heart in this way, blinding oneself to the devastating consequences of making oneself an enemy of God, is a necessary first step before

anyone can engage in conduct which will result in the most horrible of ends, apostasy or the sin unto death, and in so doing follows the pattern of the original deceiver, Satan. And just because deceit is involved does not at all mean that for this reason there is no culpability. Not at all. Eve was deceived but she still suffered the consequences. Adam was not directly deceived – he deceived himself – but he still suffered the consequences. Satan was the guardian cherub at the right hand of God, so that no creature ever had greater knowledge than he, but in his arrogance he managed to deceive himself into imagining that he could outwit and replace God. There is no better example of the terrifying power of pride/arrogance which is capable of turning genius into insanity; better to be humble and have nothing than to be proud and lose everything.

Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked.
Psalm 37:16

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.
Proverbs 11:2 NIV

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.
Proverbs 16:18 NIV

Weakness: All high priests under the Law understood the above just as we all do (or should have), and for that reason could be sympathetic to our common human plight. We may strive to be good and be on guard against arrogance and deception at the hands of others and from our own pride, but in our flesh, infested with the sin nature, perfection on this score, though we should all strive to attain it in the Holy Spirit, is technically impossible this side of heaven home.¹⁵

(17) But now it is no longer I [who] does it (i.e., commits sin), but the sin dwelling in me. (18) For I know that nothing good dwells in me – that is, in my flesh. For to will what is good lies in my power, but to carry it out does not. (19) For I do not do the good I want to, but the evil I do not want to do, this is what I do. (20) And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who am doing it but the sin dwelling in me. (21) So in respect to the Law I find that, even as I wish to do good, evil has me in its power. (22) For I delight in the Law of God in my inner person. (23) But I perceive a different law [at work] in my bodily members, waging war against the Law in my mind and taking me prisoner – [a prisoner to] this law of sin that dwells in my body. (24) Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?
Romans 7:17-24

The answer to Paul's desperate question above is of course, Jesus Christ (Rom.8:1ff.)! He is the only One who could – and the very One who did – provide that deliverance from sin and resultant death which we all need and absolutely so.

¹⁵ See BB 3B: Hamartiology: the Biblical Study of Sin, especially section I.2, "The Sin Nature".

(5b) To the One who loves us and has released us from our sins by His blood (6) – and He has made us a kingdom, priests of His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 1:5b-6

Verses Four through Six

(4) Also, no one takes this honor [of being high priest] upon himself; only one who is called by God [to serve in this way] just as Aaron was. (5) In the same way Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, [rather, God the Father appointed Him, even] the One who said to Him, "You are My Son; today I have begotten you", (6) just as He likewise says [of Him] in another verse, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek".

Hebrews 5:4-6

Other High Priests:

"Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron's sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar."

Exodus 28:1 NKJV

Moses' brother Aaron was the first high priest under the Law, appointed directly by God in the verse above. While there were other priests, descended also from Aaron through his sons, Eleazar and Ithamar (Nadab and Abihu having died without sons for offering "strange fire" before the Lord: Num.3:4), there was only ever one "high priest" at a time under the Law, namely, *the* "high priest" (cf. Lev.21:10; Num.35:25-28; Josh.20:6; Hag.1:1; Zech.3:1; Jn.11:51).

Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. Numbers 20:28 NKJV

We see here that the high priesthood passed from Aaron to his eldest surviving, Eleazar, and his son in turn, Phinehas, succeeded Eleazar as high priest as well (cf. Num.31:6; Josh.22:13; Jdg.20:28).

(11) "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. (12) Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; (13) and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.' "

Numbers 25:11-13 NKJV

However, the above does not explicitly say that the high priesthood would be confined to the

descendants of Eleazar through Phinehas, nor does scripture explain precisely how the new high priest was to be chosen. And we know from later developments that for a time, at least, the high priest came from the line of Ithamar when we learn (by his station though never actually called that in scripture) that Eli was high priest (1Sam.1:1 – 4:18). And while God's curse on the line of Eli was fulfilled (1Ki.2:27; cf. 1Sam.3:14), the promise to Phinehas was also maintained in the end and came to mean as well that the high priesthood would from thenceforth come entirely from his line of descent. This high priesthood was originally meant to last the lifetime of the individual selected (Num.35:25; 35:28; Josh.20:6), but there were times in Israel's early history where that was not the case, with the high priest being chosen or demoted by the king (1Ki.2:26; 4:2; cf. 1Sam.22:11-22). During the Millennium, the priestly line (and thus the high priesthood as well), will be restricted entirely to the line of Zadok (Ezek.40:46; 44:14-15).

And they led [Jesus] away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year.
John 18:13 NKJV

As can be seen from the verse above, by the time of our Lord's first advent, the high priesthood had become a political office which rotated among the various priestly families on a yearly basis. That this process, initiated under the Maccabees (for there were previously high priests in the regular order after the return from exile: Neh.3:1; 3:20; 13:28; Hag.1:1; Zech.3:1), was contrary to the Law is very clear (otherwise the procedure of flight to a city of refuge and sequester there until the death of the high priest would be unworkable). But we see from the following verse that God is in complete control, even when the high priest is an unbeliever and the procedures being followed by the priesthood are completely contrary to scripture.

(49) And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, (50) nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." (51) Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, (52) and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.
John 11:49-52 NKJV

So we can affirm when our context says about the high priest that "only one who is called by God" can serve as such (Heb.5:4), that there is no contradiction even in light of failure of later generations to carry out the Law properly on this point. Cyrus the Great was "called by God" even though he did "not acknowledge Me" (Is.45:4). In the end, all things and all people serve the perfect, predetermined plan of God completely, for God has used the free will of all who possess His image to carry out His design. This is a good principle for believers to remember, especially in our day and age when rulers and leaders around the globe have no apparent respect for God or for basic principles of justice. Our job as believers is to be good citizens of whatever country the Lord has placed us in (as long as we reside therein), just as long as we are not called upon to do anything contrary to the will of God or restricted from doing all that the Lord requires from us.

(1) Let every person be subject to [all] superior authorities. For no authority exists which has not [been established] by God. And those that exist are [in turn] subject to God. (2) Therefore whoever opposes [established] authority has taken a stand against God's [ordered] arrangement, and those who have done so will receive judgment upon themselves. (3) For rulers do not exist to discourage good deeds through the fear they inspire, but rather evil ones. So do you wish to have no fear of the authorities? Then do what is good, and you will have praise from them. (4) For they are ministering to God on your behalf for your [own] good. But if you do evil, beware, for they have not been invested with the power of punishment (lit., "the sword") for nothing. For they are ministering to God in the severe vengeance [they bring down] upon those who do evil. (5) Therefore it is necessary to be subject [to authority] not only because of this severity, but also for conscience' sake.

Romans 13:1-5

The Commission of Jesus Christ: Our Lord's high priesthood is different from all who went before. Paul will have much to say on this point in chapter seven and we will defer the greater part of our discussion of the superiority of Christ's high priesthood until then. What is important to note here are the similarities and the essential differences. In terms of similarities, Jesus Christ was appointed by God the Father, just like all of the other high priests; and just like other high priests, being genuinely human and having suffered through this life in all ways just as we have (and in fact to an unknowably greater degree even before the cross as we have seen: Heb.2:18)¹⁶, He is capable of sympathizing with what we human beings have to cope with here in this difficult world. In terms of differences, Jesus' appointment is not based on His human descent through Mary's line (for no priests are taken from the tribe of Judah: Heb.7:14), but directly from the Father through His divine descent, being the Son of the Father (cf. Paul's quotation from Ps.2:7: "You are My Son; today I have begotten you"). Further, this extraordinary commission came directly and verbally from God the Father Himself (cf. Paul's quotation from Ps.110:4: "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek"). Lastly and of critical importance is the qualification in the second quote: "forever". No other high priest could abide in that role forever, only the One who "has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible (i.e., eternal) life" (Heb.7:16 NIV).

(23) Now the others who have become priests are [of necessity] many since they are prevented from remaining [in office] because of their mortality. (24) But He, [Jesus Christ], because He abides forever, possesses the priesthood irrevocably. (25) For this reason He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, since He lives forever making intercession for them. (26) This is just the sort of High Priest we needed, holy, without fault, without imperfection, completely separated from sinners, and having ascended higher than the heavens [into God's presence]. (27) Unlike the [human] high priests, [Jesus] has no need of making sacrifice day by day, first on behalf of His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. For this [latter] He did once and for all when He offered Himself [as a sacrifice].

Hebrews 7:23-27

¹⁶ See Hebrews Chapter 2, under "Verse Eighteen".

Verses Seven through Ten

(7) [where (i.e., in Ps.2:7 and Ps.110:4) He is also speaking to Jesus our High Priest,] who in the days of His flesh[ly life] (i.e., while He was on earth prior to the resurrection), having offered up prayers and petitions with powerful shouting and with tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and having been hearkened to on account of His devoutness, (8) although being [God's one and only] Son, nevertheless He came to understand [firsthand in His humanity] from what He suffered [what] obedience to God [truly is] (i.e., what it takes for a human being to be fully obedient to God), (9) and, once He was perfected (i.e., had perfectly completed His course), He became the source of eternal salvation for all who are obedient to Him (i.e., believers), (10) having been previously proclaimed by God [the Father Himself] High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 5:7-10

Powerful Shouting and Tears: The "seven trials of Christ", the gauntlet our Lord endured following the last supper and prior to His spiritual death on the cross in Calvary's darkness, is well documented in the four gospels.¹⁷ And on no occasion is our Lord seen to cry or shout or in any other way manifest any sort of emotional or physical distress in spite of the horrific abuse He suffered prior to that spiritual death which saves us from our sins. Quite the opposite.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
Isaiah 53:7 NIV

(12) And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. (13) Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" (14) But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly.

Matthew 27:12-14 NIV (cf. Mk.15:4-5)

(60) And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" (61a) But He kept silent and answered nothing.

Mark 14:60-61a NIV

It is sad to have to observe that Luke 22:43-44 is not part of the Bible. It is a much later addition, no doubt being added by an overzealous scribe in order to "explain" the "fervent cries and tears" (NIV) of our context. Nothing of this sort is said anywhere in scripture to have taken place . . . before the darkness fell. Indeed, nowhere in the gospels (or anywhere else in scripture) is our Lord described as exhibiting the behavior described in our context . . . except after that darkness fell on Calvary.

¹⁷ See BB 4A: Christology, section I.5.k, " The Trials of Christ".

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?"
Psalm 22:1 KJV

While nothing experienced in this life we all lead was able to make our Lord cry out, we know from this verse, a Messianic psalm as is clear from the many references to the crucifixion therein (e.g., "pierced hands and feet" in v.16; "casting lots" for His clothing in v.18; and cf. Matt.27:43 with v.8), that being hit with the sins of the entire world was a different matter. There is no way that we can understand the depths of pain and suffering Jesus Christ endured to save us. Suffice it to say that none of us could stand judgment for the least of our own sins, even if we were fit to do so (which we are not). It is very important to note, however, that the answer to the question, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" was well known to our Lord, before, during and after His sacrifice for us. He appeared to Moses in a burning bush which, though it burned continually, was not consumed – a clear and vivid picture of the fiery death He would have to die for us in order for us to be saved (Ex.3:1-6). Our Lord knew that for us to be saved He would have to undergo this unimaginable baptism of fire (Lk.12:50). Our Savior asked not for His sake but for our sake for that "cup to pass" from Him (Matt.26:39-42; Mk.14:36; Lk.22:42), so that we might have some small idea of the magnitude of what He was about to do for us on the cross . . . as well as to understand that He knew full well ahead of time just what it would take to rescue us from damnation. In the same way, this question "why?" is asked entirely for our sake, because without the cross, we were all lost.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
2nd Corinthians 5:21 ESV

Furthermore, when our Lord quotes Psalm 22:1 and asks this question from the cross (Matt.27:46; Mk.15:34), it is ***after*** He had won the victory of victories in dying for our sins during those three hours of darkness (Lk.23:44), ***after***, that is, He had already "been hearkened to on account of His devoutness" by the Father and delivered through the trial of all trials upon which the entire plan of God depends. Our Lord said this for our benefit, that we might seek and understand the answer: clearly, it was "for our sake" that He was forsaken.

(28) After [all] this (i.e., His physical suffering and His spiritual death for the sins of the world), when Jesus knew that everything had now been accomplished in order for the [prophecy of salvation found in] scripture to be fulfilled, He said, "I am thirsty". (29) Now a jar of wine-vinegar lay there, so they placed a sponge full of the wine-vinegar on a hyssop [stalk] and brought it to His mouth. (30) So when He had taken the wine-vinegar, Jesus said, "***It*** (i.e., salvation) ***has [now] been accomplished!***" (113), and having thrown back His head, He gave up His spirit.
John 19:28-30

All of our Lord's words spoken from the cross after the darkness came to an end thus reflect the fact that He had taken away the sins of the world, having accomplished the entire basis for the plan of God by removing that otherwise impenetrable barrier of sin that would have kept us out

of the Father's presence forever.

(14) For [Jesus] Himself is our peace, for He has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition, that is, the enmity, (15) by discharging the Law of the commandments and its requirements with His [own] body, so that He might re-create the two into one new Man by making [this] peace, (16) and might reconcile both in one Body to God through His cross, having by means of it abolished the enmity [between God and mankind]. (17) For when He had come (i.e., the 1st advent), He proclaimed the gospel of peace to you who were far away [from God], and peace to those who were near. (18) For it is through Him that we both have our access to the Father by means of one Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14-18

(13) And though you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions and in the un-circumcised state of your flesh, [God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ], having forgiven you all your transgressions. (14) [God] has erased the charge against us along with its particulars (i.e., our sinful nature and personal sins) which opposed our [relationship with Him], and He removed it [as an obstacle] between us by nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14

Our Lord's "why?" is thus not a complaint. It is a cry of victory given parable-style for any and all who in the Spirit can quickly supply the answer: "He was forsaken *for us*".

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 NIV

In "hearkening" to Him, and in delivering Jesus *through* the crucible of the cross and *from* death through resurrection, the Father also heard *us*, because without our dear Savior's endurance of spiritual death on the cross and subsequent resurrection, we would have been doomed to the lake of fire (Rom.4:25). But the Father *did* "hearken" to our Lord, thus fulfilling another promise in the Messianic Psalm which foretold the events of Calvary.

For he (i.e., the Father) has not despised or scorned *the suffering* of the afflicted one (i.e., the Messiah); he has not hidden his face from him *but has listened to his cry for help* (just as in Heb.5:7 – our context).

Psalm 22:24 NIV

Save Him from Death:

He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

Matthew 26:39 NKJV

And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."
Mark 14:36 NKJV

. . . saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."
Luke 22:42 NKJV

As explained above, these words uttered by our Lord in Gethsemane just prior to His arrest and subsequent crucifixion were given for our benefit. Jesus knew full well the reason why He had come into this world and just exactly what was necessary to provide salvation for us: there was no other way in which we could be saved other than the cross.

(52) But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (53) Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? (54) How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?"
Matthew 26:52-54 NKJV

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.
Mark 8:31 NKJV

Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"
Mark 9:12 NKJV

. . . saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."
Luke 9:22 NKJV

"But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation."
Luke 17:25 NKJV

Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."
John 2:19 NKJV

Thus our Lord Jesus Christ understood completely that He would be delivered *through* not *from* death, spiritual then physical. This had been prophesied (e.g., Ps.22:1ff.; Is.53:1ff.) and was thus fully known by our Lord . . . but He still had to endure the fiery judgment of the cross for us to be saved. Absolute confidence in the Father's deliverance of Him – and absolute certainty of the necessity of His sacrifice – were undoubtedly the anchors to which our Lord held fast as He died for our sins in those three hours of darkness, calling out to the Father in total assurance of being

answered by Him, knowing, however, that He would have to be delivered *through* rather than *from* the ineffable suffering He was enduring on our behalf, confident that also once salvation had been secured and He had next given up His spirit (Lk.23:46, quoting Ps.31:5), that the grave could not hold Him (Jn.20:9; Acts 13:30; 17:31; Rom.1:4; 6:4-5; 8:11; 10:9; 1Cor.6:14; 15:4; 15:15; Eph.1:20; Col.2:12; 1Pet.1:21): just as His deliverance from the spiritual death of the cross was certain, so also His physical resurrection was likewise assured, and destined to be the basis for ours as well (Rom.4:23-25; 8:11; 1Cor.6:14; 2Cor.4:14; Eph.2:5-6; Col.2:12; cf. Jn.20:9; Acts 13:30; 17:31; Rom.1:4; 6:4-5; 10:9; 1Cor.15:4; 15:15; Eph.1:20; 1Pet.1:21).

(9) Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, (10) because you will not abandon me to the realm the grave, nor will you let your holy one see decay.

Psalm 16:9-10 NIV

(23) "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. (24) But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

Acts 2:22-23 NIV1985

(31) Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. (32) God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

Acts 2:31-32 NIV1985

(34) "God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' (35) So it is also stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your holy one see decay.' (36) Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. (37) But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay."

Acts 13:34-37 NIV

(18) For Christ died once for us on account of our sins, the Righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in [His] flesh, but having been made alive by the Spirit. (19) It was also by means of [this same Holy] Spirit that [Christ] visited the [angelic] spirits in prison (i.e., in Tartarus in the Abyss), and proclaimed [His victory to them].

1st Peter 3:18-19

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep . . .

Hebrews 13:20 NIV

His Devoutness: The Greek word used here, *eulabeia*, is difficult to translate with a single

English word. It only occurs twice in the New Testament (here and at Hebrews 12:28), with another five occurrences of words derived from the same root (verb: Heb.11:7; adjective: Lk.2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12). In each case, the central idea is one of godly fear and reverence which motivates proper response to God, that is, a willingness to carry out God's will. That is what "the devout" do. And in the case of our Lord, the mission He was required to carry out included the unimaginable pressure of having to bear and to be judged for the sins of the entire world. That is piety, devotion and godly commitment to a degree beyond understanding or compare – and explains why the Father "hearkened" to Him as a consequence of it.

Turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him, endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despite, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

The sacrifice of the cross is beyond our understanding, but Christ endured it and was delivered through it because of His perfection and perfect endurance of all the Father asked of Him. And we must never forget that He did it *for us*. We are "the joy set before Him" on whose behalf our Lord "endured the cross". There is no greater devotion. And we would do well to follow His example in all godliness, and reverent, reciprocal devotion – because we will be standing before Him soon enough.

(10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (11a) Since, then, *we know what it is to fear the Lord*, we try to persuade others.

2nd Corinthians 5:10-11a NIV

Obedience to God the Father: Our Lord is said to have "learned" (KJV, NIV, ESV, NASB, etc.) this "obedience through what He suffered". And while it is certainly true that we learned to obey our earthly fathers through their disciplining of us when we transgressed their authority, the Son of God never once violated the Father's authority – otherwise we would have been doomed and damned (cf. 1Cor.15:17). This statement, then, requires a little explanation.

For just as through the disobedience of the [first] man[, Adam,] the human race found itself sinful, so through *the obedience* of the One, [Jesus Christ], the human race will find itself [accounted as] righteous (i.e., justified), [through faith in Him].

Romans 5:19

(8) He humbled Himself, becoming *obedient* to the point of death, even [His] death on [the] cross [for us all].

Philippians 2:8

The context of the obedience mentioned at Hebrews 5:8, following immediately upon "having offered up prayers and petitions with powerful shouting and with tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and having been hearkened to on account of His devoutness" in Hebrews 5:7, coupled with the verses above, demonstrates that this "obedience" our Lord

"learned" (KJV, NIV, ESV, NASB, etc.) refers to His willingness to endure the judgment of the cross, persevering through to the end until all of the sins of the world were paid for. The Greek word for "learn", *manthano*, is synonymous with our English verb of the same meaning. In Greek, however, the word very often bears the meaning of experiential learning. That is why I have chosen to translate this part as I have done here:

He came *to understand* [firsthand in His humanity] from what He *suffered* [what] *obedience* to God [truly is] (i.e., what it takes for a human being to be fully obedient to God).

Hebrews 5:8

While "learning through suffering" (resulting in understanding) is not a concept with which English speakers are necessarily familiar, it was a commonplace in the ancient world. The *locus classicus* for this concept is famous play, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, line 177, where the notion is described as a divine principle:

The fixed law that "wisdom comes by suffering".

– Smyth

Learning comes by suffering.

– Smyth revised by Crane, Bird and Nagy

Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.

– Morshead

The law is this: no wisdom without pain.

– Chappell

Man by Suffering shall Learn.

– Murray

"Pain is wisdom"

– Theodoridis

These differing translations all translate the Greek phrase *pathei mathos*, literally, "lesson by suffering". Indeed, the words for suffering in Greek very often *mean* "to experience" rather than merely to feel pain, and there remain hints of this in the New Testament as well where "experience" is the suffering of "passion" (Rom.1:26; 7:5; Gal.5:24; Col.3:5; 1Thes.4:5; cf. Acts 28:5). The essential idea here is that unless one has actually experienced some things, one cannot really understand them in the same way that those who have personal experience of them do. This is surely a concept with which we moderns are familiar enough. A person can be well-read in the history and practice of warfare, can even be a professional military officer, but unless he has actually experienced combat first hand – the danger, the noise, the loss, the adrenaline rush – his understanding will of necessity be less than one who has actually done so. Our Lord had to become a human being in addition to His deity for us to be saved, because only by

possessing a sinless human body could He be judged for our sins. But it is at least in part for this reason intimated in our context, namely, to have that actual experience of being truly human and fighting this same fight that we are fighting, that our Lord took on true humanity.¹⁸

For because He has *suffered*, He is able to help those who are being tested, since He Himself was [also] put to the test.
Hebrews 2:18

We note, however, that the above verse refers primarily to all of our Lord's experiences *before* the cross; His being "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is.53:3 NKJV), has rendered our Lord fully cognizant *as a human being* of what we are experiencing here in this world. Our present verse, in contrast, is speaking of the *obedience* He "learned" or came to fully understand, again, as a human being, while He persevered in enduring the judgment of the sins of the entire world while *on* the cross. Our Lord in His deity of course "knew" and "understood" – indeed, it is impossible for God to not know anything. And our Lord in His humanity did know "what was coming" as we have seen above (Matt.26:39; 26:52-54; Mk.8:31; 9:12; 14:36; Lk.9:22; 17:25; 22:42; Jn.2:19). But until the actual experience of being judged for the sins of the world, until He actually suffered the punishment for all of our sins, our Lord had not yet actually demonstrated – and therefore could not be said to have "learned" or come to fully and experientially "understand" – the full measure of obedience necessary to carry out the Father's will, fulfilling the plan of God in the victory of victories in washing away our sins with His blood, His spiritual death whereby He paid the full penalty for us. We may say that prior to what He did for us on the cross, the great salvation through which alone we have life eternal, our Lord did "understand" perfectly well in principle, but that it was through the actual experience of death for us that we were saved through our Lord's demonstration of perfect obedience in submitting to the judgment of the cross on our behalf.

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.
Romans 5:18 NKJV

Just as it was not the level of understanding which Adam possessed before the fall that mattered but the actual act of disobedience that resulted in sin spreading to the whole human race (Rom.5:12), so also it was not our Lord's level of understanding before the fact of what obedience to the Father entailed but His actual suffering of spiritual death for us all whereby He gained the experiential knowledge of what it took to provide us with salvation. And while Adam's understanding of what "dying thou shalt die" was necessarily different and more complete *after* he ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, so also our Lord's understanding in His humanity of the cost of obedience was necessarily different in terms of being based on actual human experience *after* He had in fact suffered and died for all our sins on that second tree which has brought us life eternal (1Pet.2:24; cf. Gal.3:13), and through which we

¹⁸ Although of course the level of suffering which He endured was far beyond that of any other human being (as we have already seen in that context: Hebrews chapter 2, verse eighteen).

will have access to the tree of life forever.¹⁹

Happy are they who are washing their clothing (i.e., in the blood of Christ by believing in Him: Rev.1:5) so that they will have a right to the tree of life and they may enter by the gates into the city [of New Jerusalem].
Revelation 22:14

Perfected: The Greek verb here, *teleioo*, is part of an important group of New Testament words whose essential meaning is often overlooked. The root, *tel-*, has to do with finality, ends, completion (cf. "teleology"), and so when applied to anything having to do with the perfect plan of God is often best translated as "perfect, perfection, perfected". Thus *to teleion*, "the perfect", refers to the completed, perfect, written Word of God (1Cor.13:10; Jas.1:25; cf. Jas.1:17), which is contrasted by Paul in 1st Corinthians chapter thirteen with temporary spiritual gifts which provide only partial knowledge of the truth. And when applied to the experience of believers, this root/verb refers to reaching the milestone of spiritual maturity (1Cor.2:6; 14:20; Col.1:28; 4:12; Eph.4:13; Phil.3:15; Heb.5:14; 6:1; Jas.1:2-4; 2:22; 3:2; 1Pet.1:13; 1Jn.4:18; cf. Matt.5:48; 19:21; Jn.17:23; Col.3:14; 1Jn.4:12; 4:17), of finishing our life's course in completing God's plan for it (Phil.3:12), and of our final, perfect status in resurrection (Heb.12:23). In regard to our Lord, however, this root/verb refers to His successful completion of His unique course upon which the entire plan of God depends – for Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us *is* the plan of God.²⁰ Only by successfully carrying out the mission of the cross, dying for the sins of the world and removing that great barrier between life and death, could our Lord become "the source of eternal salvation for all who are obedient to Him (i.e., believers)" (Heb.5:9).

They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: ***He has done it*** (i.e., accomplished salvation; quoted by our Lord on the cross: Jn.19:30)!
Psalm 22:31 NIV

(28) After [all] this (i.e., His physical suffering and His spiritual death for the sins of the world), when Jesus knew that everything ***had now been accomplished*** (*teleioo*) in order for the [prophecy of salvation found in] scripture to be fulfilled, He said, "I am thirsty".
(29) Now a jar of wine-vinegar lay there, so they placed a sponge full of the wine-vinegar on a hyssop [stalk] and brought it to His mouth. (30) So when He had taken the wine-vinegar, Jesus said, "***It*** (i.e., salvation) ***has [now] been accomplished!*** (*teleioo*; quoting Ps.22:31)", and having thrown back His head, He gave up His spirit.
John 19:28-30

For Those who are Obedient to Him: This is an important qualification which we all need to take to heart. Jesus Christ died for all (2Cor.2:14-15; 1Jn.2:2), so that all might be saved

¹⁹ See CT 6: Last Things, section II.9, "The River of the Water of Life and the Tree of Life".

²⁰ See also BB 4A, section I.5.1.3, "Our Lord's Final Statements of Completion [on the cross]".

(Jn.3:16; 1Tim.2:4). But all human beings have been created with the image of God, the God-given right to decide for themselves whether or not to believe in Jesus Christ so as to be saved.

"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."
John 3:18 NKJV

Everything that exists has been designed by God to reveal His existence and His perfect nature, so that failure to accept these truths ingrained into the universe and into the heart of each and every one of us calls down God's wrath rather than resulting in the salvation Jesus died to provide (Rom.1:18-21; cf. Eccl.3:11). Simply put, we human beings are placed here in this world "to believe". That is our fundamental obedience. Failure to comply is a rejection of God's essential commandment that leads to life; thus while faith leads to life, failure to put one's faith in Jesus Christ – failure to be obedient – results in trading salvation for condemnation instead.

For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, having known it, to turn back from the holy *commandment* that had been delivered to them.
2nd Peter 2:21 NKJV

(4) For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. (5) Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?
1st John 5:4-5 NKJV

Melchizedek:

"You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."
Psalm 110:4b (Heb.5:6)

In the introduction and our treatment of prior chapters, we have already discussed Melchizedek as well as his relationship to our Lord's twin offices of King of Kings and High Priest, and we will have occasion to go into greater detail in our treatment of Hebrews chapter seven. The order of Melchizedek is unique in that 1) he was appointed by God directly and did not receive that honor through the Mosaic Law or human descent, and in that 2) scripture describes that office as eternal: "a priest *forever*". Both of these unique characteristics apply to our Lord as well – only in actuality as the genuine antitype with respect to whom Melchizedek was merely a representative human type (analogous to David being a "type of Christ" in his special appointment to the kingship and unique rule over all of Israel). In our passage in this context, however, there is another important piece of information that should not be overlooked. Paul points out here that Jesus "had been *previously* proclaimed by God [the Father Himself] High Priest in the order of Melchizedek", referencing the quotation above (Ps.110:4). What this implies, what this *means*, is that our Lord's unique high priesthood is something that should have been anticipated by His contemporaries and that should absolutely have been accepted by now by the believers in the Jerusalem church. This is a point of scripture, a verse they all knew well, but

whose contents they had so far failed to believe and apply. For if they had, they would not still be relying on and attending to human priests appointed under the Law whose very legitimacy had now been supplanted by the coming of and the glorification of *the* High Priest who had bought them with His blood.

For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.
Hebrews 7:12 NIV

Verses Eleven through Fourteen

(11) We have much to say about this [subject of Christ's spiritual death and priesthood], but it is difficult to communicate [such advanced things to you] because your ears have become lazy. (12) And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], [instead] you need someone to teach you what the basic principles of God's truth are [all over] again! You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food! (13) For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant. (14) Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.
Hebrews 5:11-14

Much to Say:

I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual benefit (i.e., through teaching you the Word) so that you may strengthened [in your spiritual growth].
Romans 1:11

Paul was always deeply desirous of communicating with others the vast knowledge of the truth he had been given and had worked so hard to amass. Much to his chagrin, the believers in Jerusalem had, for the most part, regressed to the point of forgetting whatever advanced knowledge they had previously accrued. Just as we make the truth our own through believing it (as the Spirit converts it from *gnosis* to *epignosis* when we do believe truth we are taught²¹), so also if we should come to reject the truth we once believed, it is no longer useful to us – because only truth-believed can be applied to our lives through the Holy Spirit. So while it may be difficult to completely forget secular information we have learned (such as, e.g., the multiplication tables), truth is different. Truth is only useful to believers (or to unbelievers who hear and accept the basic truth of the gospel), and only if said believers *believe* the truth they have been taught. Even unbelievers are capable of memorizing theological tracts in the same way that they would memorize historical dates and facts for a test. But mere knowledge of information which may be true is useless unless the person also believes it. That belief is what the Spirit uses to convert mere knowledge (*gnosis*) to "full knowledge" (*epignosis*), the only kind

²¹ See BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.6.e, "Faith Epistemology"; and BB 5: Pneumatology, section II.B.3.a.3, "Spiritual Growth Epistemology".

of knowledge which edifies the believer, which builds him/her up spiritually, that is, which produces spiritual growth. But these believers had been deconstructing and demolishing the spiritual edifices they had previously built up, the precious internal spiritual infrastructure which had in many cases been tested and strengthened through very difficult trials (Heb.10:32-34; cf. Heb.6:10). Given that we believers are left here in this world after salvation to grow, not regress, this choice is the worst possible bargain imaginable, giving up our hard fought prior gains for the pottage of the world. And it is also beyond dangerous, since, when allowed to proceed to extremes, such reversion can result in either apostasy or the sin unto death.

Paul's frustration with these individuals is thus both palpable and understandable. To use an academic analogy, wishing to give them a graduate school seminar in advanced Bible doctrine, he finds that they have forgotten everything and now are in need of a crash course in remedial basics lest they flunk out altogether. And he was not wrong in his assessment. Turning back to the Law which proclaimed a Savior not yet come was in essence rejecting the cross, something only a baby believer completely ignorant of the basic teachings of Christian doctrine could possibly be deceived into doing – or someone who had rejected the truth they had once embraced.

(20) For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [these weak believers] should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. (21) For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than – once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ which was] committed to them – to turn their backs on it now. (22) And so in their case this proverb is true: "The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow, though washed, to her muddy sty".

2nd Peter 2:20-22

Become Lazy: The Greek adjective *nothros* and the synonym from which it is derived, *nothes*, refer to sluggishness, dullness, even stupidity, often applied to donkeys in Classical times. Whether always the case or not, donkeys (and mules) are known for their stubbornness in seemingly refusing to learn anything from experience, as in the case of Frederick the Great's pack mule of whom he remarked, when a particular general was being wrongly esteemed on account of his experience, that just because said mule had accompanied him on all of his campaigns didn't mean it had learned anything. That this is the gist of the painful comparison here is clear from the verses which follow. The Jerusalem believers, the older ones, at any rate, had been the beneficiaries of the finest Bible teaching in the history of the world, starting with our Lord Himself, followed by all of the apostles, with the city and its church being ground zero for the expansion of the Church in the initiation of our new dispensation of the Spirit (Acts 5:16; 6:7; 8:14; 8:25; 11:2; 11:22; 11:27; 13:13; 15:2; 15:4; 21:17).

(4) And gathering them together [Jesus] commanded [the disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to await the promise of the Father (i.e., the Holy Spirit) "which you heard about from Me. (5) For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Spirit not many days from now".

Acts 1:4-5

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth".

Acts 1:8

But like donkeys and like the famous king's mule, in spite of these unique benefits and advantages, the Jerusalem believers had, by and large, not profited from the significant and distinctive opportunities they had been given. This deficiency had not come about through a lack of ability to understand the truth they were taught – they had been given the Holy Spirit as we are. And it was certainly not because of a lack of access to good teaching since they had been given the privilege of listening to the teachings of most of the apostles and the brothers of our Lord first hand and on a daily basis (whereas in, e.g., Philippi, Paul had only been present for a short time). And while we cannot say for certain, it stands to reason that the one place in the world of that time where it would have been possible to find copies of all of the New Testament books of the Bible yet written would have been Jerusalem.

The verb "become" here is also important to note. These believers were not always as they had now become. Previously, we are right to conclude from Paul's words, their "ears" had not been "lazy" but eager instead for the truth. Between those early days and the time of writing, however, the Jerusalem believers had developed the terrible habit of not being willing to continue to listen to the teaching of the truth, and as a result had regressed spiritually. As we have pointed out many times, it is impossible to stand still for very long in the Christian walk. If a believer is not advancing, sooner or later he/she will begin drifting backwards, and it is this pattern for which Paul reproves his readers now, a pattern which has resulted in much lost ground: once spiritually mature, many of the members of this congregation have fallen back into spiritual immaturity.

(1) But, brothers [and sisters], I could not speak to you as spiritual (i.e., mature) but as carnal (i.e., controlled by the flesh rather than the Spirit; cf. Rom.8:5-14; Gal.5:16-25), as if you were [still but] infants in Christ (i.e., spiritually immature). (2) I gave you milk to drink (i.e., very basic truths), not solid food (i.e., advanced teaching necessary for growing to maturity), for you were not yet able to digest it. Indeed, you are still not able to do so.

1st Corinthians 3:1-2

The process of regression towards spiritual infancy from a prior place of spiritual maturity does not happen over night.²² But once truth is rejected, of necessity something else will fill the vacuum thus created in the heart. It is a basic facet of the sin nature that people tend to rationalize their behavior and justify their actions. If a prior enthusiasm for and commitment to Bible teaching is allowed to slide into neglect, sooner or later such a person will find reasons for having done so ("I already know these things.") and to defend that perilous course of action ("It's not really all that important since I'm already saved, and who is this 'Paul' anyway?"). Such

²² See in the introduction: "Spiritual Regression and Spiritual Growth"; and in BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.2.d, "Phase One Hardening of the Heart: Darkening of the Truth".

rationalizations and justifications are very dangerous because of course without positive spiritual momentum, there will be no further growth, and once the entire process of spiritual growth is called into question in one's heart, that is, when a Christian moves beyond being slack though still understanding that what they are doing is problematic, to the point of no longer accepting that their negative course of action is fraught with spiritual risks, then the process of re-hardening the heart has already begun.

(19) And this is the [basis for] judgment: the Light (i.e., Jesus Christ) has come into the world, yet men loved the darkness more than the Light because their deeds were evil. (20) For everyone who commits detestable practices hates the Light and does not come to the Light, lest his deeds be exposed [for what they really are]. (21) But everyone who acts in accordance with the truth comes to the Light so that it becomes obvious that his deeds have been done in God (i.e., in accordance with God's will).
John 3:19-21

(8) For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. (9) Now the fruit light produces accords with all goodness, righteousness and truth. (10) So [in all things] you should [always] be calculating what it is that pleases the Lord. (11) And do not participate in dark deeds which bear no fruit. But rather expose them as such. (12) For the things done in darkness by those [who reject the truth] are shameful even to mention. (13) But all things become visible [for what they really are] when they are illuminated by the light, (14) because everything which has been made visible [through such illumination] is light. That is why it says, "Arise, sleeper! Awake from the dead, and Christ will shine [His light of truth] upon you!"
Ephesians 5:8-14

Turning one's back on the light always winds up in turning toward the darkness. We are either walking in the Spirit or in the flesh (Gal.5:16-17). Going downhill is easier than going up, and once a person turns back downhill, the descent picks up a momentum of its own which is hard to reverse. At that point, it matters little what the reasons were for abandoning the right way and reverting to the wrong way. Allowed to continue to the bitter end, this process will result in apostasy or the sin unto death.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."
Matthew 7:13 NIV

No doubt succumbing to the fear and pressure to accommodate with their unbelieving compatriots, complicated by the draw of tradition, seemed persuasive in the turning of so many of the Jerusalem believers back to the now defunct Law (2Pet.2:22). But nothing done out of fear of this world is ever right or good (1Jn.4:18).

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.
Proverbs 14:12 NIV (Prov.16:25)

"But I have against you [the fact] that you have abandoned [that] love [for learning the truth that] you had at first."

Revelation 2:4

By this Time (v.12): We have discussed apostasy and the sin unto death many times in the past. These two horrific occurrences are the final outcomes for a believer turning away from the Lord and refusing to repent and turn back around, away from evil and back towards the good, away from the darkness and back towards the light. Paul was hoping and striving for the Jerusalem believers *not* to reach either one of these final, awful states, and he contrasts here their previous promise of spiritual advance with their present situation wherein they have "forgotten" much of what they had learned. However, it is the case that believers only "forget" the truth by turning their backs on it. Since this distressing phenomenon is very common in our own time, it will be helpful here to consider the process of reverting to the world. Not all believers who abandon their once "red hot" love of the truth take that poor choice all the way to the spiritually destructive ends of completely losing their faith (apostasy) or of engaging in behavior so scandalous that our Lord removes them from this earth (the sin unto death). More often, believers who abandon the fight stop advancing and drift backwards slowly, becoming gradually "lukewarm" rather than outright "cold" immediately.

(15) "I know your works, that they are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! (16) As it is, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth."

Revelation 3:15-16

We see our Lord's disdain for this attitude and this approach in the verses above. So while we naturally would be tempted to evaluate as better off spiritually than an outright rake or rebel any believer who has given up his/her commitment to daily Bible teaching and spiritual growth for the "mess of pottage" offered by the vast majority of churches in this country, from our Lord's point of view, those who have turned back completely have a better chance of coming to their senses once they have reaped the full harvest of their backsliding.

"And he who was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceptiveness of wealth stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that he becomes unproductive."

Matthew 13:22

(18) "And others were sown among the thorns. These are those who heard the Word, (19) but the worries of life and the deceptiveness of wealth, and the lust for other things grow up [over them like thorns and weeds] and stunt the [productive power of the] Word so that they become unproductive."

Mark 4:18-19

"And as to that [seed] which fell among the thorns, these are they who have heard the Word, but who are stunted by worries and by wealth and by the pleasures of this life with the result that they do not bear a full crop to harvest."

Luke 8:14

Being unproductive is a direct result of the lukewarm approach. Mind you, this lack of productivity is **actual** deficiency in **the Lord's** estimation, even if in the eyes of those engaging in "good works" and in the eyes of other human beings, there seems to be some sort of production going on. After all, not all "works" will be rewarded, even if done by believers (1Cor.3:12-15), and it is definitely the case that much so called "do-gooding" throughout history has merely been promoting satanic activity (e.g., present day "green religion" and all such "virtue signaling" causes and behaviors which in truth only promote the devil's agenda). During the Tribulation, persecution of believers will wrongly be assumed to be "good works" (Jn.16:2; cf. Paul's persecution of the Church based on the same false assumption: Acts 9:5; 22:7-8; 26:14-15; Gal.1:13). True, godly production, done in the Spirit, the kind that will receive a reward at the judgment seat of Christ, is the production genuinely ordained by God (Eph.2:10; cf. Gal.6:9) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Gal.5:22; cf. Phil.2:13). All such godly production has as its objective the edification of the Church of Jesus Christ through the truth of the Word of God and genuinely contributes thereto.

In this way (i.e., by "embracing **the truth**" in v.15), the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.
Ephesians 4:16

For it is from this Source (i.e., the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ) that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed (with and by **the truth**) through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given.
Colossians 2:19b

When functioning in an ideal manner, the Church is a perfect body, supplied with every part necessary for organic growth, as each part helps the other to grow spiritually through the truth of the Word of God. Proper functioning of the Body can include works of charity when these are motivated by a genuine desire to please Jesus Christ (rather than out of guilt or false assumptions about earning salvation or God's blessings through what we "do"; cf. Is.57:12), and when these good works extend His witness through His Word to unbelievers (Matt.5:16; 1Pet.2:12), or when they help other believers in material need – because, obviously, no one can be expected to grow spiritually for very long without enough to eat (e.g., Jas.2:15-16; cf. Tit.2:14). But all legitimate "good works" for which we believers will be rewarded are always focused on the goal of salvation and mutual growth through the Word of Truth.

(6) I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. (7) So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. (8) The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be **rewarded** according to their own **labor**.
1st Corinthians 3:6-8 NKJV

And [so] let us not grow weary of doing the good [work of God], for at [the appointed]

time we will *reap* [our reward], provided that we do not give up.
Galatians 6:9

The trend in Laodicea today is towards near complete abdication of all such ambition for a good report from our Lord at His *bema* or judgment seat (Rom.14:10; 2Cor.5:10; cf. 1Cor.3:11-15).²³ This is true not only of individual believers in the main but also of most groups which present themselves as Christian. The focus of church-visible Christianity today, especially in this country, is on growing the group's numbers, improving its physical plant, and raising its societal profile. Any teaching that does take place tends to be a complete afterthought, often taking place in peripheral subgroups rather than in the main assembly, to be highly superficial, and to be mostly defective in terms of actually intersecting with the truth. The best thing that can be said for the vast majority of Christian churches and denominations these days is that in some cases they may help their members stagnate where they are in spiritual infancy so that they may at least be prevented from backsliding into complete spiritual reversal. But avoidance of apostasy and the sin unto death – desirable outcomes to be sure – is not the sole objective our Lord has given us. We are here to produce a good crop for Him (Matt.13:33; 25:21).

In steering clear of such disasters as apostasy and the sin unto death, believers who have come to a spiritual halt in "stagnation churches" have, however, at least managed to escape the dire situation facing many in the Jerusalem church addressed in the book of Hebrews. Not content with giving up their spiritual advance, these latter were actually regressing in the most subtly dangerous of ways, dangerous, because aligning themselves with the defunct Law was, in effect, denying the efficacy of the cross, subtle, because the Law and the temple rites were their traditional heritage so as to possess a patina of false legitimacy that has always been difficult for certain believers, especially Jewish believers, to see past.²⁴

"But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die."
Ezekiel 18:24 NIV

The above quotation makes the issue crystal clear. Turning from the right way to the wrong way has the most dire of consequences. And abandoning spiritual momentum in progressing forward can easily, all too easily, lead to a swift retreat backwards.

You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.
Galatians 5:4 NIV

²³ See CT 6: Last Things, section I.7, "The Judgment and Reward of the Church".

²⁴ Even the apostles, Paul included, had no easy time making this transition. See BB 6B: Ecclesiology, section I.B.5, "The Time of Transition versus the Present Status Quo".

Falling into a no-growth pattern of stagnation is bad enough, but abandoning even superficial Christian influences and returning to the ways of the world without restraint is worse, just as scripture affirms (2Pet.2:20-22). And that is what the Jerusalem believers were guilty of doing. Re-embracing the Law or Gnosticism as they were doing was far worse than stagnating in a lukewarm church or denomination today as it constituted a complete reversal of their spiritual course, backwards instead of forwards (more akin today to returning to the Roman Catholics, Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, e.g.).²⁵ Although the order of the steps below may vary and though they may often overlap a great deal, we may describe the process of reversion generally as follows:

1) Boredom and Fatigue:

For one reason or another, a positive believer may find him/herself feeling stale or "dry" and become dissatisfied with the good approach he/she had previously adopted. This may happen because of boredom or fatigue with the discipline of praying, of Bible reading, of accessing orthodox Bible teaching, of believing and applying the truth to one's life. Doing the right thing may come to seem stodgy to some, especially if said individual is not taking pains to motivate him/herself to love and enjoy the things that really are "the best part" in this life (Lk.10:40-41). All of us get tired. All of us need to make a habit of "encouraging ourselves in the Lord" whenever we begin to feel spiritually fatigued for whatever reason (1Sam.30:6). The Bible commands us to rejoice innumerable times (e.g., Phil.4:4). If we fail to keep ourselves oriented to eternity (1Cor.15:58), looking forward to the resurrection and our reward (Eph.1:18), keeping our eyes on the Lord we love in gratitude for what He has done for us (1Pet.1:7-8), whose fault is that but our own? For those believers for whom spiritual growth is allowed to become humdrum and rote, bereft of joy for the opportunities we have been given and anticipation of all that is to come for those who persevere, then the hard work involved in growing, progressing and producing can easily come to seem a burden. Once a believer has fallen into that trap, he/she has made him/herself vulnerable to negative influences. These negative influences can be summarized as two general categories: the attraction of the world and false teaching coming from malevolent sources. And of course, the two are often combined.

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?
Galatians 5:7 NIV

The Galatians, as in the quote above, had become weary of doing things in the right way in spite of the fact that they were the recipients of many miraculous spiritual gifts (Gal.3:2-5), a fact which beautifully illustrates the greater power of the Word relative to dramatic human experiences, even when they are unquestionably coming from God (cf. 2Pet.1:19). This is a phenomenon anyone tempted to dabble in false charismatic teachings and behaviors ought to consider carefully. As a result of their spiritual fatigue, the Galatians were "ripe for the picking" when, in Paul's absence, some teachers of the Law arrived and told them, among other things, that circumcision was required for salvation. Rituals are very attractive to certain individuals,

²⁵ Col. R.B. Thieme, Jr.'s *Reversionism* (Houston 1978), is well worth reading on the subject of spiritual regression.

and their appeal does much to explain the success of, e.g., the Roman Catholic church. But the only rituals which are valid in this life are the ones actually ordained by God Himself, and the Law has now been set aside and replaced by the cross of Jesus Christ, so that communion, the ceremony of remembering Him, is the only valid ritual remaining.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.
Galatians 3:1 NIV

Rituals give people "something to do" and, for those inclined towards works-salvation, something to feel proud of, "doing things for God". God has plenty He wants us to do (as we continually affirm), but ~~we~~ we do not have the right to dictate to Him what it is that He should accept from us – any more than Cain did.

For those more inclined to self-indulgent libertinism than works-asceticism, this world is filled to the brim with all manner of entertainments, ranging from the seemingly innocuous to the undoubtedly and intensely satanic. What they all have in common is that they can easily become idols in the hearts of those who turn away from the right path out of desire to "have some fun" (Ezek.14:3-4; Eph.5:5; Col.3:5). Understand, "having fun" is not necessarily sinful. Abandoning spiritual growth for a life dedicated to whatever one finds enjoyable instead, the impossible "pursuit of happiness" when all such happiness is only "myth-happiness" apart from the Lord, however, is the first step on the road to perdition.²⁶

(10) A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest (i.e., slacking off spiritually) – (11) and (spiritual) poverty will come on you like a thief and (spiritual) scarcity like an armed man.
Proverbs 6:10-11 NIV

Whether manifesting themselves either through chasing after the things of this world or giving attention to false teaching – which is "more fun" on account of the rituals of legalism or the false miracles and hyper-emotionalism of the charismatics, for example – allowing fatigue and boredom to metastasize in these ways is in essence pure spiritual laziness (at least at first before the heart of said believer has completely turned), the very charge that Paul has leveled at the Hebrew believers in our context (Heb.5:11).

2) Stagnation and Inertia:

Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks.
Ecclesiastes 10:18 NIV

The Christian life is a long road – and a long fight. It is not uncommon for believers to occasionally become tired and to slack off from their good approach (as mentioned in the section above). This is not unusual in any of life's activities. In fact it is most unusual for such brief

²⁶ See SR 4: Satan's World System, section I.2, "The Vanity of Life".

periods of "laziness" not to happen periodically (Heb.5:11). However, as in all things, if a person is not good at disciplining him/herself to "snap out of it" after a short interval, stagnation will follow and inertia will set in. That is true of all good things, as in the passage above, and it is certainly true of spiritual growth. Just as in home repair, where if nothing is done, eventually the roof *will* leak, so also in spiritual terms, if a believer stops growing and gives him/herself over to complacency, momentum will ebb away entirely soon enough.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Psalm 51:12 NIV

Sometimes the consequences of failing to pull out of spiritual torpor can be serious while allowing a few days of slacking to turn into a lengthy pattern can be sinful in and of itself (as it was for David in the context of Psalm 51 above). That Psalm was written in the wake of his disastrous liaison with Bathsheba (and ensuing murder of Uriah), a series of events that followed close on the heels of David's unaccustomed dalliance in the palace at Jerusalem while the army was on campaign. The "wake up call" that David received was severe, and it is incumbent upon us all to answer any and all such unmistakable signals from the Lord if, when we are guilty of letting our guard down and letting up on our spiritual growth, we are called to account by the Lord for it (and the sooner we respond the better).

Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Savior.
Deuteronomy 32:15 NIV

"When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me."
Hosea 13:6 NIV

Sometimes, as in the verses above, loss of momentum follows success. We have noted elsewhere on more than one occasion that the "prosperity test" is one of the most difficult for mature believers to pass. If all is blessing, plenty and success, it is very common to assume, whether consciously or subconsciously, that one has "arrived" and that no further efforts for the Lord on the spiritual battlefield are necessary. But this particular test is designed to see if what we really wanted in this life was the Lord or the prosperity He can give us. If it is only the latter that we were really interested in, losing spiritual momentum when we achieve our material goals will be a very easy matter.

For the backsliding of the simple shall slay them,
And the careless ease of fools shall destroy them.
Proverbs 1:32 ASV

3) Degeneration and Regression:

You have turned [back] into [spiritual infants] who need milk and [can] not [yet tolerate] solid food!

Hebrews 5:12b

Just as in a vehicle losing power going up hill, first, momentum is lost, then, after it comes to standstill if ever so briefly, it begins to roll downhill. The speed of this negative progression will vary with the individual, but as we have affirmed many times, standing still in the Christian life is difficult. With all of the pressures brought to bear by the world system Satan has set up and the impetus of the sin nature, standing still is almost more difficult than moving forward, so that if a Christian is not progressing spiritually, decline is a very common and, without a good deal of effort, somewhat inevitable result. In the Old Testament, this phenomenon is often called "backsliding" (*meshubha* from the verb *shubh* meaning "to turn back").

"Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast deceit, they refuse to return."

Jeremiah 8:5 KJV

"Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

Jeremiah 2:19 NIV

The flip side of this spiritual regression is spiritual degeneration. Moving backward goes hand in hand with reversing the process of growth that had previously led to spiritual advance. Losing ground spiritually stems at its roots from also reversing one's previous priorities. Instead of putting what the Lord wants first (that is what "denying oneself" means: Matt.16:24; Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23), those caught up in spiritual reversion now put self first; instead of turning away from the world and its essential vanity, those who have ceased to grow and now started to slip begin to turn back to the pointless things of this world, loving it instead of loving the Lord.

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:4 NKJV

(15) Do not be a lover of this world, nor of what is in this world. If anyone is a lover of this world, a [genuine] love for the Father is not in him. (16) For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (17) The world and its lust are passing away, but whoever does God's will is [going] to stay [alive with God] forever.

1st John 2:15-17

4) Rationalization and Self-justification: Whether stagnating or regressing and whether gradually or swiftly, it is human nature to try to find reasons and excuses for whatever we really want to do. In terms of all relations with God, that is doubly the case. When confronting the truth of eternity, the fundamental issue of eternal life or the second death, no one can handle for long the psychological pressure of facing damnation (potentially or actually), so that this psychological

duress is the genesis of all such rationalization and self-justification where God and His truth are concerned, leading to much personal mythologizing – i.e., lying to oneself – and the hardening of the heart which goes with it.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"
Malachi 2:17 NIV

Concomitant with finding excuses and reasons for bad behavior and only a short trip down the road of regression is turning truth on its head as in the verse above to the point of actually justifying such conduct as somehow "good". Taken to extremes, all manner of evil in the world can be justified as "pleasing" and even "helpful" to God.

"They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God."
John 16:2 NIV

This backwards approach goes hand in hand with assuming too much about our personal worth, that is to say, with arrogance – a problem with which the apostle Paul had to contend continually also when dealing with the Corinthians.

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.
1st Corinthians 10:12 NKJV (cf. Heb.4:11)

You are looking at things as they are outwardly. If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, have him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so too are we.
2nd Corinthians 10:7 NASB20

For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.
2nd Corinthians 10:18 NKJV

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?
2nd Corinthians 13:5 NIV (cf. Gal.6:4)

5) Resentment and Antipathy:

(8) Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (9) Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"
Genesis 4:8-9 NIV

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did

he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.
1st John 3:12 NIV

Cain's resentment of the Lord's rejection of his arrogant sacrifice (offering vegetables that he was proud of having grown when what was required was the symbolism of blood looking forward to Christ), is what led to his murdering his brother Abel. Abandoning consciousness of guilt for failing to do what God wants us to do, then rationalizing our reactions and justifying what we may do next in contravention to God's will is the next logical step in the progress of spiritual regression (all too well documented in the annals of human history, where justifying all manner of horrific actions by those who committed them has always been commonplace).

The godless in heart harbor resentment; even when he fetters them, they do not cry for help.
Job 36:13 NIV

Instead of responding to God's reproach of them, those who reach this stage of spiritual retreat often react by doubling down on their bad behavior.

(7) And at that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah, and said to him: "Because you have relied on the king of Syria, and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore the army of the king of Syria has escaped from your hand. (8) Were the Ethiopians and the Lubim not a huge army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet, because you relied on the Lord, He delivered them into your hand. (9) For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him. In this you have done foolishly; therefore from now on you shall have wars." (10) Then Asa was angry with the seer, and put him in prison, for he was enraged at him because of this. And Asa oppressed some of the people at that time.
2nd Chronicles 16:7-10 NKJV

Once reverse momentum builds up, animosity towards the Lord and all who speak for Him likewise increases.

"Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"
Isaiah 30:11 NIV

6) Re-hardening and Re-Darkening: At a certain point, believers who are in deep rebellion against the truth begin to repeat the process they were engaged in as unbelievers, hardening their hearts against that truth and accepting lies in its place, darkening their hearts by turning away from the light and towards the darkness, away from what is good and back towards what is evil.²⁷

(22) "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be

²⁷ For the details of the process of hardening of the heart, please see BB 4B: Soteriology, section II.2.d, "Phase One Hardening of the Heart: Darkening of the Truth"; Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart; and Hebrews Chapter 3, under "Harden the Heart".

full of light. (23) But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"
Matthew 6:22-23 NIV

(19) "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (20) For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."
John 3:19-20 NKJV

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.
Romans 1:25 NIV

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
Romans 12:21 NKJV

(17) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do with their minds emptied [of the truth]. (18) They are darkened in their thinking, separated from the life of God because of this [willful] ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts [against the truth], (19) who, when once they have lost all sensitivity [for what is right], have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. (20) This is not how you learned to follow Christ.
Ephesians 4:17-20

7) Apostasy and the Sin unto Death: Eventually, there is no difference between these believers and unbelievers, not to notice at least, and, in the case of those who have reverted to a state of unbelief through apostasy, none in fact.²⁸

(20) For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ [these weak believers] should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. (21) For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than – once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ which was] committed to them – to turn their backs on it now. (22) And so in their case this proverb is true: "The dog has returned to his vomit, and the sow, though washed, to her muddy sty".
2nd Peter 2:20-22

Those who have refused to let go of their faith even as they have reverted to loving the world and making it and its pleasures their idol, inevitably find that our Lord's patience with this approach is not endless.

²⁸ See BB 3B: Hamartiology, section IV.6, "Apostasy and the Sin unto Death".

There is sin leading to death; I am not saying that he should ask about that.
1st John 5:16 NASB20

Those who were or make a pretense of being teachers (Rom.16:17-18), will find this out swiftly and suddenly.

(1) But there arose among the people false prophets, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who shall introduce destructive false doctrines – even denying the Master who bought them – and bringing *swift destruction* upon themselves. (2) And many will follow their lascivious ways so that the way of truth will be subject to blasphemy on their account. (3) And in their greed they will exploit you for profit by means of their fraudulent teachings. [God's] condemnation upon them long since has not been lying dormant, and [His impending] destruction of them has not been slumbering.
2nd Peter 2:1-3

The Teaching of Righteousness (v.13):

(13) For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of righteousness (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant.
Hebrews 5:13

Before explaining what "the teaching of righteousness" is, Paul first reminds his readers of what it is not: spiritual regression in place of spiritual progress. While every believer ought to know – and ought to *want* to know – as much as possible about what is right and righteous, what God the Father finds good and what He wants us to do as those who belong to Him and His Son, going backwards spiritually to the point where these Jerusalem believers had actually forgotten even what they had learned in the past, had believed and had acted upon in faith, should be anathema to us all. It is certainly anathema to God.

If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema. Maranatha.
1st Corinthians 16:22 ASV

If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be bound under a curse!
Marana Tha! ["Return to us, O thou our Lord!"]
1st Corinthians 16:22

And how could anyone "crucifying the Lord afresh" (Heb.6:6) claim to have any great love for Him?

And although by this time you ought to be [capable of] teaching [such things], [instead] you need someone to teach you what *the basic principles* of God's truth are [all over] again!
Hebrews 5:12a

Paul reproaches his audience in this exasperated exclamation not with their spiritual regression

but with the loss of spiritual opportunities that regression has squandered. Milk is good, and as "newborn babes" we should "deeply desire" the nourishment of the milk of God's Word (1Pet.2:2). But after a point we need to wean ourselves to solid food (Heb.5:14), and, having mastered the basics, move on to the deeper and more advanced teachings of scripture (Heb.6:1). But what ought never to be heard of is any group of believers actually regressing to the point of needing milk all over again in place of solid food. It does not take much imagination to understand that the next step in that progression of regression is loss of faith altogether, the very thing of which the apostle Paul was most concerned.

"Basic principles" in verse thirteen is, in Greek, *ta stoicheia*, a phrase which readers will remember from the introduction and from our prior study is also used by Paul to refer to the misuse by both Jewish Gnostics and legalists of God's fundamental design of the universe to wrongly support their own false teachings.²⁹ Thus the choice of words by Paul in the Spirit here is far from accidental: through accepting Satan's teachings in place of God's, these believers were now in dire need of returning to the truth which their poor decisions had virtually eradicated from the hearts by this time. Only by a radical change of direction – away from evil and back towards the good – would it be possible for them to arrest their terrifying and precipitous spiritual decline before it was too late.

First and foremost, believers are righteous – have God's own righteousness – being justified or made righteous through our faith in Jesus Christ, having received that blessed gift of being right with God through trusting in Jesus Christ and **not** by working for it in any way, especially not through the works of the Law or "doing things" for God.

And [Abraham] **believed** in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for **righteousness**.
Genesis 15:6 NKJV

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be **justified** in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (21) But now the **righteousness** of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (22) even the **righteousness** of God, through **faith** in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference.
Romans 3:20-22 NKJV

Therefore we conclude that a man is **justified by faith** apart from the deeds of the law.
Romans 3:28 NKJV

But to him who does not work but **believes** on Him who **justifies** the ungodly, his **faith** is accounted for **righteousness**.
Romans 4:5 NKJV

Knowing that a man is **not justified** by the works of the law but by **faith** in Jesus Christ,

²⁹ See Hebrews: Introduction, section I.b, "Gnosticism", and I.c, "Legalism"; this principle is also reviewed in the first section of the introduction to this chapter above.

even we have *believed* in Christ Jesus, that we might be *justified by faith* in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be *justified*.
Galatians 2:16 NKJV

Having God's righteousness, as all believers do, it is ever after incumbent upon us to live in a righteous way, and that is what "the teaching of righteousness" helps us to do.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Psalm 23:3b NKJV

In the translation of Hebrews 5:13 "the teaching of righteousness" is expanded and explained as teaching which shows us "how to live righteously". Given the fact that the essential meaning of this perfectly good set of English words (i.e., righteous, righteously, righteousness) is often misunderstood, a bit of explanation here may be necessary to understand just what sort of teaching for recovery from reversion Paul is recommending here. The first thing to note is that, in terms of Greek and Hebrew vocabulary, there is no difference between justice and righteousness, between being just and righteous, and between acting justly and righteously, since the same words are used for both concepts and are only distinguished in English, not in the Bible (i.e., these related words all come from the roots צדק/*tsedek* in Hebrew and δικ-/*dik* in Greek respectively).

Indeed, there is not a righteous (<צדק/*tsedek*) [or just] man on earth who continually does good (<טוב/*tobh*) [or what is right] and who never sins.
Ecclesiastes 7:20 NASB95

In essence, doing right and acting justly, being righteous and just, is doing what is "good" in God's eyes, the opposite of being wicked and doing evil/bad in His eyes. Note, it is not what mankind says is "good" or "just" or "righteous" that matters; it is only the Lord's opinion on this most important of all distinctions which matters. The Jewish Gnostics could claim they were "doing good" and "promoting righteousness" by engaging in their Gnostic combat activities, but God pronounced it "bad/evil/unrighteous". The Jewish legalists who had returned to the misapplied, misused and now defunct Law could make similar claims and could even be applauded for doing so by all the unbelievers in Jerusalem who had never accepted Jesus as the Messiah in the first place, but God the Holy Spirit was telling them plainly here through His inspiration of this letter that, quite to the contrary, they had turned the truth upside down: God was *not* pleased, and they were skating on very thin ice indeed.

(13) For men of this sort are false apostles, workers of guile, masquerading as apostles of Christ. (14) And it is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.
(15) So it comes as no surprise that his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. ***Their end will be according to their deeds.***
2nd Corinthians 11:13-15

The prince of darkness always represents himself as an angel of light, and his servants always do the same, even as they are extinguishing the light as fast and as best they can, replacing it with

darkness, replacing good with evil and righteousness/justice with sin and true injustice.

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;
Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness;
Isaiah 5:20a NKJV

The above is Satan's policy in its most succinct formulation. Light and darkness have nothing to do with each other and the one cannot be mistaken for the other unless or until the truth has been rejected for the lie and the heart of the person in question has been hardened. Similarly, good and evil, righteousness and its corrupt opposite share no common ground whatsoever. God is good; Satan is evil. As God's followers, therefore, we are expected to reject all evil and cleave instead entirely to the good.

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.
Ephesians 1:4 NKJV

That He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.
Ephesians 5:27 NKJV

But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."
1st Peter 1:15-16 NKJV

"He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still."
Revelation 22:11 NKJV

In terms of the way the Lord sees things – the only One whose opinion we should value – there are the righteous and the unrighteous, the just and the unjust, the good and the evil, the ones walking in the light and those walking in darkness . . . there are believers and there are unbelievers. For while it is true that all believers sin (1Ki.8:46; Ps.30:3; Eccl.7:20; Rom.3:23; Jas.3:2), by virtue of our position in Christ as those who have placed our trust in Him, we believers are light in the Lord (Eph.1:8; cf. 1Jn.1:7), sanctified, "holy" in Christ (1Cor.1:2; cf. Acts 26:18) – justified, made righteous through our faith in Jesus (Rom.5:1). When we do err, we recall that all of our sins have already been paid for by Jesus Christ (1Jn.2:2); that we were forgiven everything when we first believed (1Jn.2:12); that we are forgiven ever after whenever and as soon as we confess our sins to Him (1Jn.1:9); and that He is our Advocate before the Father when we do sin (1Jn.2:1).

Yes, we all stumble from time to time here in the devil's world under the duress of Satan's system, opposition from his followers seen and unseen, and the unrelenting pressure of our sin natures – and God has made provision for that, giving us His Holy Spirit to lead and support us along with the means of recovery (confession/restoration) when we do fail. But it is a far cry

from occasionally being tripped up for a moment on the one hand and on the other to turning completely around so as to embrace once more this dark world and the evil lies of its diabolical master, a world and its ultimate destruction which we had once escaped. The latter was what the Jerusalem believers were doing, in one way or another, to one degree or another, and the end result of their dangerous behavior, if not corrected, would be parlaying the darkness of this world into eternal darkness in the end. No matter how fearful the consequences of refusing to compromise with the unbelievers around them might be, it was not worth that.

(4) "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. (5) But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!"
Luke 12:4-5 NKJV

And no matter how appealing it may have seemed to indulge in the diametrically opposed ascetic and libertine pleasures of Gnosticism, it was not worth that.

"For whoever makes it his purpose to preserve his life will end up losing it, but whoever forfeits his life for My sake will find that he has preserved it. What point is there for a man to come to possess the entire world, if he should then come to lose his life? Or what can a man pay to regain his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay every man in his own coin."
Matthew 16:25-27

In the Bible, righteousness is doing what is right in God's eyes. If we know what is right and fail to do what is right, such knowledge is of no use to us whatsoever.

For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than – once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ] committed to them – to turn their backs on it now.
2nd Peter 2:20

Our God is light – and there is no darkness in Him at all (1Jn.1:5). With Him there is no inconsistency, no "shadow of turning" (Jas.17). For He is absolutely perfect. He does not change, and it is for that very reason that we who believe in Him are preserved (Mal.3:6). Those who would be with Jesus forever, therefore, need to strive to be like Him (1Jn.2:6). Walking with Him in godly reverence of Him (Ps.147:11; cf. Ps.19:9; Is.11:2-3; 2Cor.5:11), for our God is a jealous God (Ex.34:14; Deut.4:24), jealous for our salvation, jealous for our sanctification/holiness, jealous for our spiritual growth. He does not compromise or settle and He is not pleased with us when we do (as the Jerusalem believers were doing). Light and darkness have no middle ground, and He is disgusted with all who are lukewarm, refusing either to be hot or cold (Rev.3:15-16). To please our Lord, we have to choose for Him with all our hearts. We cannot "swear by the Lord" and also "Molek" (Zeph.1:5 NIV); we cannot "drink the cup of the Lord" and also "the cup of demons" (1Cor.10:21) – not and have Him be pleased with us, not without the risk of falling away from Him entirely.

(15) "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! (16) So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Revelation 3:15-16 NIV

Discerning between Good and Evil (v.14):

(14) Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] distinguish between good and evil.

Hebrews 5:14

In chapter six, Paul will restate in brief what returning to basic instruction looks like (Heb.6:1-3). First he reminds his readers here of the predicate for all advanced instruction in the faith, namely, basic spiritual maturity achieved through responding to the "teaching of righteousness" mentioned in the prior verse. No growth is possible without the Holy Spirit, and we believers of the Church Age are blessed with and should always be grateful for His indwelling of us all ever since we first put our faith in Jesus Christ (Rom.8:9b; 1Cor.12:13b). And while we know of a certainty that the Spirit will always do His part in aiding our growth, there are two other necessary things which require our response to His guidance: our exposure and response to the truth, and our application of that truth we have learned and believed to our daily lives.

The "teaching of righteousness", the prerequisite for the advanced instruction which the Jerusalem believers had become ignorant through spiritual regression, constitutes, as we have seen above, learning what it is right for Christians to do in every aspect of those daily lives. Once the basic truths of our faith have been mastered (Heb.6:1-3), every Christian's life should center around learning and applying the whole realm of biblical truth so as to pass from maturity into being a seasoned Christian warrior, tried and tested in the heat of battle from the challenges that come every mature believer's way, and then onto the ministry which Christ has for us, whatever that may be, wherein we put to good use the spiritual gifts we have been given to do our part for the edification of Christ's Body, His Bride, His Church, our brothers and sisters in the faith.

And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of *righteousness* to God.

Romans 6:13 NKJV

Simply put by Paul in the verse above, we see the goal of our complete transformation as Christians: no longer are we being swept along by the devil's world but instead are contributing members of Christ's army on earth, giving ourselves over to Him to be employed by Him for His purposes in building up His Church.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own

ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

At least this maturity and contribution to the mutual edification of the Church is the point to which we are meant to arrive as quickly as possible after we are saved. This takes longer for some of us than for others, and, sadly, most believers, especially in our era of Laodicea, never even reach spiritual maturity in the first place, let alone get to this point of the full functioning of their gifts in ministry to the Body of Christ after being tempered through testing.

None of us starts out fulfilling Romans 6:13 and Ephesians 4:11-16. We all have to grow, progress, pass testing, and then begin to produce the full crop Jesus Christ has in mind for us individually. And even after we have reached maturity, have advanced and begun to minister, we still all require the daily sustenance of the "solid [spiritual] food" meant "for the [spiritually] mature" (Heb.5:14). Even after getting to the point of actually serving the Church, none of us will ever be without the need for spiritual nutrition – any more than even the best athletes can go without physical sustenance just because they are in outstanding physical shape. Indeed, for those at their peak physically, good nutrition is more important than ever, and the same is true for those who have reached the spiritual goals the Lord has given us. After all, this epistle was written to individuals many of whom had indeed reached that high peak in the past (Heb.6:10), but who had now, through neglect of just such spiritual nutrition (Heb.10:25), reverted to the point of immaturity (Heb.5:11-13).

(13) For everyone who partakes of [such] milk is ignorant of the teaching of *righteousness* (i.e., how to live righteously), because he is a [spiritual] infant.
Hebrews 5:13

Righteousness is doing what is right. We are already righteous by position in Christ, justified by our faith in Him. But we also need to learn to reflect that inherent righteousness in everything we do here in this evil world. In terms of how to *behave* righteously in this world, as believers, all we really need to know is what God says the right thing to do is and then to do it. After salvation, that is knowledge acquired easily enough regarding the most basic things all new Christians need to know on this score: the ten commandments and rudimentary knowledge of what is sinful in terms of what to stay away from (i.e., sanctification/holiness or "defense"); Bible teaching, Bible reading, and prayer in terms of what to positively embrace daily (i.e., spiritual growth or "offense").

But while these things are self-evident – and validated in our consciences by the Spirit always – life for believers here on the battleground of the devil's world is far too complex, subtle and deceptive for such rudimentary knowledge to be sufficient for a believer to survive and thrive spiritually. Just as we protect our young children from a great many worldly things until they are old enough to be able to handle – and to need to handle – everything life may throw at them on their own, so also God is merciful, loving and protective of new believers, giving us the time and space to grow before allowing us to be tested beyond our means and before we are ready (1Cor.10:13). God is patient to a marvelous degree (e.g., Ps.103:8-13), but it is important for believers not to misread and abuse that patience. Sooner or later we expect our children to walk on their own and not count on us always carrying them. In the spiritual life, we all start out crawling, but sooner or later the Lord expects His children to start walking the walk of spiritual maturity . . . and to keep moving forward rather than reverting.

The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:9b NKJV

(6) So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. (7) Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

Genesis 3:6-7 NKJV

Our God is a God of the most amazing mercy. The same instrument that brought spiritual death to our first parents was also the vehicle whereby their consciences were empowered with the basic understanding of essential right and wrong shared by all human beings, basic knowledge without which neither individual human beings nor the human race corporately could possibly survive.³⁰ But just as this sense of good and evil is rough at the beginning of life and takes much training to refine (as may be seen from Adam and Eve's attempt to hide their sin from God and, in Adam's case, to attempt to justify that sin: Gen.3:7-13), so every human culture has developed systems of child-rearing and education to fine-tune this basic human understanding of the difference between right and wrong. And just as refinement is needed in the secular realm, growth in the ability to distinguish between *relative* right and wrong is even more necessary in the spiritual realm. Because while basic things are clearly good and clearly evil, in this complex world in which we live, the world ruled by the evil one and his satanic system, there is much evil masquerading as good, and many things which are not necessarily evil in and of themselves although they might appear suspect to immature believers (Rom.14:1-23; 1Cor.6:12; 10:23).

For whatever is not from faith is sin.

Romans 14:23b NKJV

³⁰ See BB 3A: Biblical Anthropology, section IV.1.b, "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil", and BB 3B: Hamartiology, section I.3, "The Conscience".

Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be made subject to the authority of anything (i.e., let any behavior compromise my spiritual growth or that of others).

1st Corinthians 6:12

Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but not everything edifies (i.e., contributes to spiritual growth of oneself and others).

1st Corinthians 10:23

(28) But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. (29) I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? (30) If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

1st Corinthians 10:28-30 NIV

This mature refinement, this discernment, is the ability to "distinguish between good and evil" to which Paul is referring in our context verse (Heb.5:14). Calibrating our consciences to be able to make these more subtle judgment calls is in many respects what spiritual growth is all about (as it applies to our navigation of this dark world). Focusing more and more on the Lord, His sacrifice for us and the glories to come is of course the prime goal of spiritual growth from the standpoint of refining our thought processes; but discernment in analyzing the situations and circumstances with which we are confronted daily as we walk through this world is its practical counterpart.

Solid [spiritual] food is for the [spiritually] mature, those who by [diligent] practice have trained their [moral] perceptive faculties (i.e., consciences) to [properly] **distinguish** between **good** and **evil** (i.e., ***in careful application of the truth through the Spirit***).

Hebrews 5:14

We have previously devoted an entire segment of Bible Basics to the study of this issue.³¹ Suffice it to say here that for the Spirit to help us make the critical distinctions between subtle cases of right and wrong, good and evil, to navigate this wicked world in a godly way, we first have to give Him the leverage He requires to help us, namely, biblical truth stored our hearts. In other words, we first have to know the truth – and **believe** it – in order for us to be able to effectively apply it with the Spirit's help. The more we know, the more we grow, the more sensitive we become to the Spirit's guidance, in other words, the more spiritually mature we become, the better we will get at spiritual discernment, and the less likely we will be to be taken in by subtle attacks from the evil one.

Not a little ironically and certainly tragically, these believers to whom Paul wrote, although they had previously received what was arguably the best spiritual education of any believers past or

³¹ I.e., BB 6B: Peripateology: the Study of the Christian Walk; see especially section I.C, "Spiritual Discernment".

present (Jerusalem being the place where our Lord taught and whence the apostles had launched all of their outreach ministries), had reversed course and reverted to the status of spiritual infants, no longer able to take in solid food but in dire need of the milk of basic Christian teachings. Under such circumstances, it is little wonder that they had regressed to the point of failing not only to see subtle distinctions between right and wrong but had actually begun to embrace outright evil (the defunct Law and Gnosticism) and turn entirely away from the absolute good.

When any believer starts to assume that Bible teaching is no longer necessary or important, it generally isn't long before this same process of regression sets in.

The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.

Hosea 14:9b NIV

(14) Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. (15a) Hate evil, love good.

Amos 5:14-15a NIV

And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

Malachi 3:18 NIV