

HEBREWS 10:19 – 11:16

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E. Overlap: We have a great priest who takes us into heaven (10:19-25) – Heb. 10:19-25 contains numerous verbal parallels with 4:14-16 which signals that this is the end of the section on Christ's appointment and work as a high priest that began in 4:14-16. Guthrie states (n. 2, p. 340), "an *inclusio* is a literary device by which an author marks the beginning and ending of a section by verbal parallels." These verses also serve as a transition to the fourth and final hortatory interjection that runs from 10:26 – 13:19.

1. Let us draw near to God (10:19-22)

¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence for entering the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰a new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, [through] his flesh, ²¹and [since we have] a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, the hearts having been sprinkled [clean] from an evil conscience and the body having been washed with pure water.

a. The writer in these verses exhorts his hearers to approach or draw near to God. He bases that exhortation ("since") on the fact (a) they as Christians ("brothers") have confidence for entering into God's presence because of Christ's sacrifice (vv. 19-20) and (b) they have a great high priest over the house of God (v. 21).

(1) The fact Christ died as the true and fully efficacious sacrifice for sins and serves as Christians' great high priest in the immediate presence of God in heaven provides all the confidence we need to heed the exhortation to draw near to God, to relate to him, especially in worship (including prayer), with a new level of intimacy.

(2) Christ opened for mankind unprecedented access to God's presence, a way through the curtain into the Holy of Holies, and he did so by his blood, by means of his flesh or body offered in sacrifice. This is a "living way" because Jesus, who is the way, is living.

b. The manner in which we are exhorted to draw near to God is with a true heart and in full assurance of faith. We come with the new heart produced by God's Spirit, a heart that wants the things of God, and with a deep conviction about the truth of heavenly realities and the certainty of God's promises.

c. The exhortation to draw near to God assumes that certain conditions have been met, namely that the hearers' hearts have been sprinkled clean from a bad conscience and their bodies have been washed with pure water.

(1) To draw near to God one must have had one's heart purified from guilt by the sprinkling of Christ's blood, by the personal appropriation of his all-sufficient, fully efficacious sacrifice. He purifies even our consciences from sin so as to remove that last barrier to intimacy with God.

(2) To draw near to God one also must have had one's body washed with pure water in the rite of baptism, which is where one receives the sprinkling of blood that cleanses the conscience.

(a) As Paul Ellingworth observes in *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 523: "Almost all commentators . . . see here a reference to baptism."

(b) For example, William Lane states in *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990) 287:

The reference in v. 22b is almost certainly to Christian baptism, which replaces all previous cleansing rites. Christian baptism belongs to the new covenant because it is accompanied by the reality it symbolizes. Both clauses of v. 22b provide complementary interpretations of the event of baptism. The washing of the body with water and the purging of the heart are complementary aspects of Christian conversion.

(c) James D. G. Dunn observes in *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970) 213-214:

The close complementary nature of the two cleansings (of heart and body) [referred to in Heb. 10:22] remind us that we cannot separate Christian baptism from conversion. It is related to the cleansing of the heart as the body is related to the heart. It is the outward embodiment of the spiritual transformation which is taking place inside a man. It would simply not occur to the writer, or to early Christians generally, that the two could be separate. The popular idea that conversion precedes baptism, and that baptism is a confession of a commitment made some time previously is not to be found in the N.T. Baptism is the act of faith, part of the total cleansing which enables the convert to draw near and to enter the Holy of Holies by the way opened up for him by Jesus.

(d) See also, **Harold Attridge**, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 289 (the writer "is no doubt alluding . . . to baptism where the effects of Christ's death and exaltation were regularly understood to be appropriated by believers"); **Victor Pfitzner**, *Hebrews*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 144 ("The language of cultic washing almost certainly refers to Christian baptism [cf. Titus 3:5]"); **F. F. Bruce**, *The*

Epistle to the Hebrews, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 250-251 ("the present reality which he has in mind is surely Christian baptism"); **James Thompson**, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1971) 138 ("The reference is undoubtedly to the readers' experience of Christian baptism"); **Neil R. Lightfoot**, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 190 ("That he is here referring to baptism seems unquestionable"); **Leon Morris**, "Hebrews" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 12:104 ("The washing of the body with pure water is surely a reference to baptism"); **Donald A. Hagner**, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990) 165 ("Bodies washed with pure water refers . . . almost certainly to Christian baptism"); **David A. deSilva**, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 340 ("The addressees, then, are reminded of their identity as those who have been cleansed by baptism and the blood of Jesus from every external and internal defilement that bars safe access to God"); **Craig R. Koester**, *Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 449 ("the listeners have their bodies washed with pure water [10:22d] through baptism").

2. Let us hold to our hope (10:23)

²³Let us hold firmly the confession of the hope without wavering, for he who promised [is] faithful.

a. The writer encourages his hearers to hold firmly to their confession of the Christian faith, the confession of hope, without wavering under the pressures they were facing. As Hagner notes (p. 165), "This is the faith that would have been confessed by these Christians at their baptism."

b. God is faithful in all things, so those who remain steadfast in their allegiance to Christ can be certain that they will receive all that has been promised.

3. Let us encourage one another (10:24-25)

²⁴And let us consider one another for stimulation of love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting our own assembly, as [is the] habit [of] some, but encouraging [one another], and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

a. The writer urges his hearers to pay attention to, to observe or be aware of, *one another* "for stimulation of love and good works." I think he is exhorting them to be conscious of the group so as to be moved by that awareness, that corporate consciousness, to stimulate love and good works among the members (maintaining or deepening what already existed – 6:10), which things serve to strengthen the bonds of fellowship and thus to bless the group by helping to counteract the forces that seek to pull one from the faith.

b. Rather than neglect the meetings of the saints, as some were in the habit of doing, they are to encourage one another. The fact he contrasts "not neglecting our own assembly" with "encouraging one another" indicates that his focus is on the discouraging aspect of neglecting our assembly. He's combating the temptation some may have to join the ranks of the defectors by cutting off the rationalization that withdrawing from church meetings is a matter solely between the worshiper and God. It also has potentially deleterious consequences for other believers.

(1) Neglecting the congregation's gatherings works in conjunction with the forces that seek to pull one from the faith. It does so because it is inherently discouraging to those gathered and it prevents the absent member from giving or receiving encouragement in that forum. We understand the inherently-discouraging aspect well in terms of the military. Desertion crushes the morale of the troops, which is why enemies always try to incite it and why armies punish it so severely.

(2) David deSilva writes (p. 342):

Withdrawing from the community does not merely mean that the individual falls short of God's gift; withdrawing discourages those who remain and diminishes the group as a whole. To paraphrase John Donne's well-known apophthegm, "each member's defection diminishes me" and my determination to hold on to the costly hope. When one's fellow believers begin to defect, it makes one wonder about the value of the enterprise and the wisdom of remaining faithful. The other believers enjoyed the same advantages and knew the same God through the same mediator. Now they decide that society's acceptance is worth more after all. On what basis should I persevere when our common experience was not sufficient to make them regard perseverance as the advantageous (or self-evident) course of action?

(3) Craig Koester writes (p. 450):

The call to show love calls for resistance to tendencies to abandon the Christian assembly in the face of reproach from outsiders (10:25a). Few people can maintain their beliefs, values, and hopes without social reinforcement, for their ties are mutual: Social bonds reinforce belief just as expressions of belief strengthen social bonds. Both personal commitment and community support are needed for people to maintain their convictions and manner of life within a larger society that does not share their views.

c. Of course, a lack of faithfulness on the part of others does not justify or excuse a lack of faithfulness on our part. We are called to abide in Christ if we're the last person on earth doing so. The Hebrew writer would not dispute that in the least, but if I'm reading him correctly, he's here shining a light on an underappreciated harm of abandoning the meetings of the saints.

d. We're not told why some members were making a habit of neglecting the congregation's gatherings, but it probably had to do with social pressure from the Jewish community and looming persecution from the Romans.

e. They are to be all the more conscious of encouraging one another, a subset of which is continuing to attend the gatherings of the saints, as they see the Day of Judgment approaching, the Day of Christ's return. They (and we) see that Day drawing nearer each time we see Christians suffer for their faith, so the writer is telling them to be even more careful to encourage the saints in light of the hardships they're experiencing and may experience in the future.

(1) The Day draws nearer each time Christians suffer for their faith because there is a set quantity of righteous suffering that will occur before Christ's return. The existence of a predetermined quantity of Christian suffering is indicated in Rev. 6:9-11.

(2) With each episode of Christian persecution there is that much less of the set quantity of righteous suffering to be experienced, so the Day of Judgment has drawn closer to that extent.

(3) This is the idea behind in Paul's statement in Col. 1:24, "Now I rejoice in the sufferings on your behalf, and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church, . . ."

(a) Obviously Paul's filling a deficiency in "Christ's afflictions" does not mean that Christ's death lacks anything in atoning or reconciling efficacy (see Col. 1:20, 22). Rather, "Christ's afflictions" refer to what in Jewish apocalyptic literature was called the "woes (or birthpangs) of the Messiah."

(b) The Jewish idea was that the Messianic Age would be preceded immediately by the suffering of God's people. This concept continues in the N.T., but it is modified. The "coming age" already has been inaugurated, but it overlaps with the "present age." This dual state will continue until Christ's return.

(c) The woes of the Messiah, the afflictions of Christ, continue as the sufferings of his people (Acts 9:4) throughout this dual age until they reach their *appointed limit*. Then Christ will return, consummating the "age to come."

(d) Paul rejoices because his bodily sufferings contribute to the total of sufferings to be endured before the consummation of the age to come. By helping to fill up this predetermined measure, Paul brings the end so much closer. By personally absorbing a disproportionate share of the affliction of Christ, the predetermined measure of suffering the righteous must endure, he reduced the amount of suffering left for fellow Christians.

- **Fourth Hortatory Interjection**

1. FOURTH WARNING: The danger of rejecting God's truth and God's son (10:26-31)

²⁶For if we deliberately keep on sinning after we received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins ²⁷but a certain, fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has rejected the law of Moses dies without mercy on [the testimony of] two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much severer punishment do you think the one who trampled on the Son of God and considered a common thing the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and insulted the Spirit of grace will deserve? ³⁰For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "[The] Lord will judge his people." ³¹[It is] a fearful thing to fall into [the] hands of [the] living God.

1.1. Encouragement is so important in light of the coming judgment because a Christian who is lured from the faith into rebellion, who turns his back on God and walks in impenitence, will be condemned to hell. By rejecting Christ, which is implicit in being devoted to sin, one rejects the only sacrifice that exists for sin.

1.2. The writer is not concerned here with the finer question of whether the damnation under which one puts oneself by abandoning Christ is in all cases unalterable. He is using the danger of eternal damnation to exhort his hearers to take seriously the need to encourage (and indirectly to warn the wavering), and all he needs for that purpose is for his hearers to appreciate that the default consequence of abandoning Christ is damnation. The fact that consequence becomes unalterable for some (those who fall beyond repentance – 6:4-8) only increases the urgency of helping the saints to remain faithful.

1.3. Given that rebellion against the law of Moses, rejection of the old covenant, was punished by death (see especially Deut. 17:2-7, 13:8), then certainly those who rebel against God under the more glorious new covenant deserve even greater punishment. In doing so, they are showing contempt for Jesus (trampling on the Son of God), who is worthy of greater honor than Moses (3:1-6), treating the blood of his sacrifice as if it is not the least bit special, and insulting the Holy Spirit whom God graciously gave to them. Who in his right mind wants to be in that position?

2. The positive example of the hearer's past and an admonition to endure to receive the promise (10:32-39)

³²But recall the earlier days in which, after having been enlightened, you endured a struggle of suffering, ³³sometimes being made a public

spectacle, by both insults and afflictions, and [at] other times being partners with the ones who were so treated. ³⁴For indeed you sympathized with the prisoners and welcomed with joy the seizing of your possessions, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an enduring one. ³⁵Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶You have need of endurance, then, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise. ³⁷For "Yet in a very little while, the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸but my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹But we are not [people] of timidity resulting in destruction but of faith resulting in [the] saving of [the] soul.

2.1. Remember the past (10:32-34)

2.1.1. The writer encourages them to remain firm in the faith by calling them to remember their past commitment, that earlier time of hardship they had endured after having received the gospel. Some had personally experienced public ridicule and persecution and others had suffered through their solidarity with brothers and sisters who were so treated. They cared for their fellow saints in prison and accepted with joy the confiscation of their property.

2.1.2. With Bruce, Lane, Hagner, I think this probably is a reference to mistreatment suffered around the time of Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, which expulsion is mentioned in Acts 18:2.

2.1.2.1. The Roman historian Seutonius (A.D. 69-140) reports that the Jews were expelled because "they constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." Most scholars recognize that "Chrestus" is a reference to Christ. The Jews were expelled because of the conflict between Jewish disciples of Christ and Jews who rejected him as the Messiah. As is evident from the Book of Acts, Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah vigorously persecuted the disciples. Though Jews generally were expelled, Seutonius' statement that the riots were "at the instigation of Chrestus" suggests the Jewish Christians were the focal point (Lane, lxvi).

2.1.2.2. Lane writes (p. 301):

The size of the Jewish community in Rome made it impossible to enforce the decree completely, but certainly both Jewish and Jewish Christian leadership had been affected. Sporadic persecution of those who remained undoubtedly followed. In the case of the Jewish Christian leaders, Aquila and Priscilla (cf. Acts 18:1-2), the Claudian decree meant banishment from Rome and almost certainly the loss of property. Others in the same house church experienced various indignities, including imprisonment, injury, and deprivation for the sake of their commitment to Christ.

2.1.3. Guthrie remarks (p. 359):

A key to the author's use of his hearers' past stance as a present example is the attitude of "joy" attendant on these circumstances. This manner in which they accepted the theft of their properties describes a spiritual condition by which one sees and celebrates greater realities than those immediately observable. The hearers had joy in the midst of their persecution because they knew that "better and lasting possessions" were promised them by virtue of their identification with the Lord and his church.

2.2. Encouragement to persevere (10:35-39)

2.2.1. The author is encouraging these saints who were under pressure not to retreat from their earlier pattern of public identification with Christ, not to be intimidated into disassociating from him and his body of disciples. If they remain faithful to him, they will receive the promised blessings of salvation; if they abandon him, they will face condemnation.

2.2.2. Verses 37-38 are a somewhat free citation of the LXX of Isa. 26:20-21 and Hab. 2:3-4, which texts the writer has conflated into one statement (though the reference to the Isaiah text is less certain). He forges the texts into an appeal to endure in faithfulness in light of the fact Christ will come in a little while, at which time their eternal destiny will be sealed according to their faithfulness or lack thereof.

2.2.2.1. No one knows the time of Christ's return (Mat. 24:36; Mk. 13:32), but whatever time God has set for that return will not be delayed. The statement that he will come in a "very little while" is best understood from the perspective of the eternal state that his coming will usher in. However long until his return, whether days or millennia, it will be a very little while compared to that eternal state. After all, the very texts he cites were written centuries earlier.

2.2.2.1.1. As Paul can describe decades of suffering as "momentary" in light of eternity (2 Cor. 4:17) and James can describe a human lifespan as "a little time" (Jas. 4:14), the Hebrew writer can describe the unknown but finite time until Christ's return as a very little while.

2.2.2.1.2. Indeed, Peter applies this concept in response to complaints about the length of time until Christ's return. He says in 2 Pet. 3:8, alluding to Ps. 90:4, that from God's standpoint of eternity a thousand years is like a day.

2.2.2.2. The shortness of the time until Christ's coming compared to the eternal consequences of faithfulness – the reward (v. 35), the promise (v. 36), the saving of one's soul (v. 37) – is an encouragement to remain steadfast under pressure. The time of suffering is a relative blink of an eye.

3. The positive example of the Old Testament faithful (Heb. 11:1-40)

3.1. Overture (11:1-3)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by this the elders were commended.

³By faith we understand the universe to have been created by [the] word of God, so that what is seen did not come into being from visible things.

3.1.1. Faith is described here as a confidence in things hoped for, a confidence in the fulfillment of God's promises, and a conviction of things not seen, a conviction about spiritual realities and the future. It was for lives lived in such confidence and conviction that the Old Testament saints were commended.

3.1.2. Faith being a conviction of things not seen is illustrated in the case of the creation of the universe. It is through faith not sight that they understand that God through his word created the universe from nothing.

3.2. First examples of faith (11:4-12)

⁴By faith Abel offered a greater sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as being righteous, God commending his gifts; and by it, he still speaks though having died. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so as not to see death, and he was not found because God took him up. For before [he was] taken up, he was commended as having been pleasing to God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please [him], for it is necessary for the one who approaches God to believe that he exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him. ⁷By faith Noah, having been warned about things not yet seen, was reverent [and] built [the] ark for [the] salvation of his house, by which he condemned the world and became an heir of righteousness [that is] according to faith.

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was destined to receive for an inheritance, and he went out not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he migrated to the land of promise, as a foreign land, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, the fellow-heirs of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, the designer and builder of which is God. ¹¹By faith he received power for [the] sowing of seed, even though beyond [the] time of age – and Sarah herself [was] barren – because he considered faithful the one who promised. ¹²Therefore also from this one man, and him as good as dead, were

born [descendants] as the stars of heaven in number and as the innumerable sand along the shore of the sea.

3.2.1. It was faith that motivated Abel to offer a better sacrifice than did Cain – it presumably motivated him to offer the best of what he had – and through that faith he was commended by God as being righteous through God's acceptance of his sacrifice. And though he was killed by Cain in reaction to his demonstration of faith, he continues to bear witness to the power of faith in an unseen God.

3.2.2. By faith Enoch was taken out of this world without experiencing death (Gen. 5:24). Though the Genesis text does not mention Enoch's faith, Gen. 5:22, 24 say that he "walked with God," which commendation implies that he brought God pleasure. The fact he brought God pleasure testifies to his faith because, as the Habakkuk text cited in 10:38 makes clear, God has no pleasure in those who shrink back (do not exhibit faith). As 11:6 declares, without faith it is impossible to please God. One must have the conviction that God exists and rewards those who seek him.

3.2.3. By faith Noah acted reverently when warned by God about a future flood and built the ark to save his family. His faith-based conduct stood as testimony against the world's unbelief and thus as a demonstration of the propriety of its condemnation. He inherited righteousness in connection with faith in the sense his faith produced righteous living, obedience to all that God commanded him (see Gen. 6:22-7:1).

3.2.4. By faith Abraham obeyed God's call to move to a place with which he was completely unfamiliar. Though that land remained for him only a promised land, not a land over which actual ownership had been secured, he endured living there as a nomad, living as a tent dweller between the time of promise and fulfillment, because his eyes were set on a city of true permanence, an eternal city built by God.

3.2.5. And by faith Abraham was enabled to do what naturally was impossible, to father a child at a very advanced age. He trusted God to fulfill his promise that he would give him a child by Sarah, and the result was a multitude of descendants. (With NIV and NRSV and with numerous commentators, I understand Abraham rather than Sarah to be the subject of v. 11.)

3.3. Interlude (11:13-16)

¹³In conformity with faith all of these died, not having received the promises but having seen them and having welcomed [them] from a distance and having acknowledged that they are strangers and sojourners on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵And if they had been thinking of that [country] from which they went out, they would have had

opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better [country], that is, a heavenly [one]. Therefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

3.3.1. Though Abraham saw the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise to bless him, to multiply and bless his offspring, and to bless all the nations through his offspring (Heb. 6:15; Jn. 8:56) in the birth and preservation of Isaac, in Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, and in his sojourning in Canaan; he, Isaac, and Jacob all died prior to actual possession of the promised land, the multitude of descendants, and the blessings of all nations. It is only together with the saints of the new covenant that they will arrive at God's ultimate goal. Yet, they lived with faith in the complete fulfillment of these promises.

3.3.2. Their perception of themselves as aliens and sojourners (or strangers) on the earth (1 Chron. 29:15; see Gen. 23:4; Ps. 39:12) was because their focus and longing was God himself and his city. You see this concept in 1 Pet. 2:11. Because God and life with him was their deepest commitment, their highest priority, God is not ashamed to be called their God, as evidenced by the fact he has prepared a heavenly city for them.

3.3.3. Guthrie writes (p. 379):

The message to the original hearers must not be missed, for their circumstance must be seen as analogous to that of the patriarchs. Perhaps their current experience of persecution has highlighted the alien nature of their earthly existence. They cannot perceive the fulfillment of God's promises to them; all they can see is the difficulty of their present crisis. The writer's point is that this is normal for people of faith. The promises of God must be embraced even though their fulfillment lies in the future. Life must be lived in our challenging, terrestrial cities in light of a better, heavenly country that will be experienced in the future. God is not ashamed of identifying with those who live in this way.