WHY READ AND STUDY THE BOOKS OF DEUTERONOMY AND HEBREWS TOGETHER?

God may do remarkable acts to bring one generation of humanity into a saving relationship with himself. But these acts will become just artifacts of history if the next generation doesn’t respond to them and join in that relationship themselves, keeping the same opportunity alive for future generations as well.

The most important saving act of God recorded in the First Testament is the exodus, the deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The most important saving act of God recorded in the New Testament—indeed, the culmination of the whole story in the Bible—is the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Two biblical books are addressed to people living in the generations right after each of these events, calling them to embrace in their own day, and for the sake of future generations, the salvation that God has inaugurated through these acts.

Deuteronomy speaks to people who lived one generation after the exodus. Hebrews speaks to people who lived one generation after Jesus. Both books stress that God’s redemptive acts were not just for those who were alive when they happened; rather, these acts present every generation with a call to decision and an invitation to relationship. In Deuteronomy Moses tells the children of the Israelis who came out of Egypt, “It was not only with our parents that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.” The author of Hebrews similarly urges his listeners, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts,” insisting that the same opportunity that people had in the past to embrace God “still remains.”
Both books invite their audiences to become part of a new covenant, a new way in which God’s ongoing relationship with the community of faith will be expressed. Deuteronomy invites the Israelites of the wilderness generation, whose nation had long related to God under the covenant made centuries before with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to embrace the covenant God had just made in the previous generation with Moses. Hebrews invites first-century Jewish believers in Jesus to recognize that through him God had established a long-promised new kind of covenant, in which the spiritual realities behind the physical features of the covenant with Moses become directly accessible, dissolving the earlier covenant itself in their heavenly glory.

Both books are written records of public addresses. Deuteronomy records a long speech that Moses gave to the people of Israel just before he died. Hebrews is a collection of messages (sermons) that its unknown author gave in worship gatherings of Jesus’ followers. These are the only two books in the Bible that are made up essentially of speeches. This form is vital to their purpose of urging and persuading their listeners to embrace the saving acts the previous generation witnessed in order to keep these works of God alive for future generations.

As these books show us, when it comes to experiencing and embracing God’s saving acts, it’s always today. It’s today for you at this moment. Will you hear God’s voice? Get together with a group of friends to read and discuss Deuteronomy and Hebrews with the help of this guide. The future depends on what you decide now.
Also available in the Understanding the Books of the Bible series:

John
Genesis
Job
Isaiah
Wisdom: Proverbs/Ecclesiastes/James
Biblical Apocalypses: Daniel/Revelation
Paul’s Journey Letters: Thessalonians/Corinthians/Galatians/Romans
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Mark
UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

DEUTERONOMY
and
HEBREWS

Christopher R. Smith
CONTENTS

Why Read and Study Deuteronomy and Hebrews?
How These Study Guides Are Different

DEUTERONOMY

Outline of Deuteronomy
Map of Places Mentioned in Deuteronomy

SESSION 1
Experiencing the Book of Deuteronomy as a Whole

SESSION 2
Moses Describes How God Has Led the Israelites
to the Edge of the Promised Land

SESSION 3
Moses Urges the Current Generation of Israelites
to Join in God’s Covenant

SESSION 4
Moses Describes What Exclusive Allegiance
to the LORD Must Look Like

SESSION 5
Moses Reviews the Nation’s Past Disloyalty as a Negative Example

SESSION 6
How the Obligation of Exclusive Allegiance Is to Be
Lived Out Practically

SESSION 7
Generosity in the Context of Worship

SESSION 8
The Administration of Justice

SESSION 9
The Concern for Justice Expands into a Vision
for Doing Right by Others

SESSION 10
No Cheating

SESSION 11
Moses Describes the Covenant Ratification Ceremony
SESSION 12
Moses Looks to the Future and Names a Successor, Witnesses, and Custodians

SESSION 13
Moses Teaches the Israelites a Song of Warning
Chart of the Names of the Tribes of Israel

SESSION 14
Moses Blesses the Tribes of Israel and Views the Land of Canaan Before He Dies

HEBREWS
Outline of Hebrews
SESSION 15
Experiencing the Book of Hebrews as a Whole

SESSION 16
The Covenant Jesus Announces Is Far Greater than the One Announced by Angels

SESSION 17
Jesus Is the Apostle Who Leads Us into God's Rest

SESSION 18
The Qualifications of a High Priest—and a Word of Challenge

SESSION 19
Jesus, as a Melchizedek Priest, Has a Superior Ministry to the Levitical Priests

SESSION 20
The Death of Jesus Is the Only Sacrifice We Ever Need

SESSION 21
Drawing Near to God, Holding on to Hope, Practicing Love and Good Deeds

SESSION 22
The Evidence of Faith in the Lives of Men and Women Whom God Commended

SESSION 23
The Great Cloud of Witnesses and the Heavenly City

SESSION 24
Living Out Faith in Community Life
HOW THESE STUDY GUIDES ARE DIFFERENT

Did you know you could read and study the Bible without using any chapters or verses? The books of the Bible are real “books.” They're meant to be experienced the same way other books are: as exciting, interesting works that keep you turning pages right to the end and then make you want to go back and savor each part. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series of study guides will help you do that with the Bible.

While you can use these guides with any version or translation, they're especially designed to be used with The Books of the Bible, an edition of the Scriptures from Biblica that takes out the chapter and verse numbers and presents the biblical books in their natural form. Here's what people are saying about reading the Bible this way:

I love it. I find myself understanding Scripture in a new way, with a fresh lens, and I feel spiritually refreshed as a result. I learn much more through stories being told and, with this new format, I feel the truth of the story come alive for me.

Reading Scripture this way flows beautifully. I don’t miss the chapter and verse numbers. I like them gone. They got in the way. I’ve been a reader of the Bible all of my life. But after reading just a few pages without chapters and verses, I was amazed at what I’d been missing all these years.
For more information about *The Books of the Bible* or to obtain a copy of this specially designed edition, visit http://www.Biblica.com/TheBooks. Watch the site for a four-volume set comprising the entire Bible in this format, coming soon.

For people who are used to chapters and verses, reading and studying the Bible without them may take a little getting used to. It’s like when you get a new smart phone, or move from using a laptop to a tablet. You have to unlearn some old ways of doing things and learn some new ways. But it’s not too long until you catch on to how the new system works and you find you can do a lot of things you couldn’t do before.

Here are some of the ways you and your group will have a better experience of the Scriptures by using these study guides.

**YOU’LL FOLLOW THE NATURAL FLOW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS**

This guide will take you through the books of Deuteronomy and Hebrews following their natural flow. (The way these books unfold is illustrated in the outlines on pages XX and XX.) You won’t go chapter-by-chapter, because chapter divisions in the Bible often come at the wrong places and break up the flow. Did you know that the chapters found in most modern Bibles were added more than a thousand years after the biblical books were written? And that the verse numbers were added more than three centuries after that? If you grew up with the chapter-and-verse system, it may feel like part of the inspired Word of God. But it’s not. Those little numbers aren’t holy, and when you read and study the Bible without them, you’ll hear its message more clearly than ever before.

To help you get a feel for where you are in each book’s natural flow, the sessions will be headed by a visual cue, like this:

**Book of Deuteronomy > Part 4: Specific Terms > Laws about Offerings and Festivals**
YOU’LL UNDERSTAND WHOLE BOOKS

Imagine going to a friend’s house to watch a movie you’ve never seen before. After only a couple of scenes, your friend stops the film and says, “So, tell me what you think of it so far.” When you give your best shot at a reply, based on the little you’ve seen, your friend says, “You know, there’s a scene in another movie that always makes me think of this one.” He switches to a different movie and before you know it, you’re watching a scene from the middle of another film.

Who would ever try to watch a movie this way? Yet many study guides take this approach to the Bible. They have you read a few paragraphs from one book, then jump to a passage in another book. The UNDERSTANDING THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE series doesn’t do that. Instead, these study guides focus on understanding the message and meaning of one book at a time. Your group will read through Deuteronomy and Hebrews in their entirety, not just selected chapters or verses. In order to accomplish this, the readings for each section will be a little longer than the ones you may be used to doing in Bible study groups. However, they’ll still take only about 8–10 minutes on average, and they’ll give you a comprehensive understanding of the books you’re considering. Your group should take a moment after each reading to allow people to ask about any words or phrases that weren’t clear so you can work to understand these together.

Sessions 1 and 15 are overviews that will let you experience Deuteronomy and Hebrews as a whole, to prepare you for considering their individual sections. You should arrange for a little extra meeting time for these two sessions. Reading through an entire book at once will be like viewing a whole movie before zooming in on one scene. Groups that read books of the Bible aloud together have a great experience doing this. (If you’ve never done it before, give it a try—you’ll be surprised at how well it flows and how fast the time passes.)

Alternatively, you can listen to a professional recording of these two books (although we really recommend reading them aloud together in your group). If you do, you should listen to them in the latest update to the New International Version (NIV), since that’s the translation used in The Books of The Bible and in these studies. The NIV Audio Bible by Zondervan (ISBN: ———) is available through Christian bookstores and many online outlets.
These books are also available in the NIV for free download in audio format at www.biblica.com/bible/audio/———.

For these overview sessions, the discussion will be briefer and designed to allow people to share their overall impressions. If you’re using *The Books of The Bible*, you may find it helpful to read the book introductions in that edition aloud before reading each book itself.

**YOU’LL DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHAT TO DISCUSS**

In each session of this study guide there are many options for discussion. While each session could be completed by a group in about an hour and a half, any one of the questions could lead to an involved conversation. There’s no need to cut the conversation short to try to “get through it all.” Group leaders can read through all the questions ahead of time and decide which one(s) to begin with, and in what order to take them up. Make any preparations necessary for the questions you choose (for example, you may need to ensure that the group has internet access). If you do get into an involved discussion of one question, you can leave out some of the others, or you can extend the study over more than one meeting if you do want to cover all of them.

**TOGETHER, YOU’LL TELL THE STORY**

The books of Deuteronomy and Hebrews each tell key parts of the story of God in order to help their original audiences recognize where they fit within that story. As you retell these parts out loud in your group, you’ll discover where you fit as well.

Each session offers suggestions for how the reading can be done creatively and meaningfully. For example, the beginning of Deuteronomy is like a story, so you’ll be invited to dramatize it by reading it in parts like a play. The discussion options may invite group members to retell the biblical story from fresh perspectives, for example, from the point of view of one of the characters, or of a person today who’s in a similar situation. This kind of telling and retelling is a spiritual discipline, similar to Bible memorization, that allows people to personalize the Scriptures and take
them to heart. This discipline is very timely in a culture that increasingly appreciates the value and authority of story.

If you’re using *The Books of the Bible*, you’ll find that the natural sections it marks off with white space match up with the sections of the reading. If you’re using another edition of the Bible, you’ll be able to identify these sections easily because their openings and closings will be clearly described.

EVERYBODY WILL PARTICIPATE

There’s plenty of opportunity for everyone to participate, by reading the Scriptures or by introducing the study or the discussion questions to the group. Group leaders can involve quiet people naturally by giving them these opportunities. And everyone will feel they can respond, because the questions aren’t looking for “right answers.” Instead, they invite people to reflect on deeper issue and pursue an understanding of them together, even if everybody doesn’t agree in the end.

YOU’LL ALL SHARE DEEPLY

The discussion questions will invite you to share deeply about your ideas and experiences. The answers to these questions can’t be found just by “looking them up.” They require reflection on the meaning of each story, in the wider context of the book it belongs to, in light of your personal experience. These aren’t the kinds of abstract, academic questions that make the discussion feel like a test. Instead, they’ll connect the Bible passage to your life in practical, personal, relational ways.

To create a climate of trust where this kind of deep sharing is encouraged, here are a couple of ground rules that your group should agree to at its first meeting:

- **Confidentiality.** Group members agree to keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential. “What’s said in the group stays in the group.”
- **Respect.** Group members will treat other members with respect at all times, even when disagreeing over ideas.
HOW TO LEAD GROUP STUDIES USING THIS GUIDE

Each session has three basic parts:

Introduction to the Study

Have a member of your group read the introduction to the session out loud to everyone. (If it’s a longer introduction, group members can take turns reading a paragraph each.) Then give everyone the chance to ask questions about the introduction, and offer their own thoughts and examples.

Reading from Deuteronomy and Hebrews

Read the selection out loud together. The study guide will offer suggestions for various ways you can do this for each session. (In some sessions, reading and discussion will be combined.)

Discussion Questions

Most questions are introduced with some observations. These may give some background to the history and culture of the ancient world, or explain where you are in the flow of the book. After these observations there are suggested discussion questions. Many of them have multiple parts that are really just different ways of getting at an issue.

You don’t have to discuss the questions in the order they appear in the study guide. You can choose to spend your time exploring just one or two questions, and not do the others. Or you can have shorter discussion of each question so that you do cover all of them. As the group leader, before the meeting you should read the questions and the observations that introduce them, and decide which ones you want to emphasize.

When you get to a given question, have someone read aloud the observations and the question. As you answer the question, interact with the observations (you can agree or disagree with them) in light of your reading from the Bible. Use only part of the question to get at the issue from one angle, or use all of the parts, as you choose. (Occasionally questions will be asked as part of the introduction to the study.)
TIPS FOR HOME GROUPS, SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES, COMMUNITY BIBLE EXPERIENCES, AND INDIVIDUAL USE

If you’re using this guide in a home group, you may want to begin each meeting (or at least some meetings) by having dinner together. You may also want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

If you’re using this guide in a Sunday school class, you may want to have a time of singing and prayer before or after the study.

This study guide can also be used in connection with a community Bible experience. If you’re using it in this way in your church:

- Encourage people to read each session’s Scripture passage by themselves early in the week (except for sessions 1 and 15, when the whole church should gather together to hear Deuteronomy and Hebrews read out loud).
- Do each session in midweek small groups.
- Invite people to write/create some response to each small-group session that could be shared in worship that weekend. These might involve poetry, journal or blog entries, artwork, dramas, videos, and so on. Some of these may be created because of specific questions in this guide that invite and encourage artistic responses.
- During the weekend worship services, let people share these responses, and have preaching on topic of the session that was done that week. Speakers can gather up comments they’ve heard from people and draw on their own reflections to sum up the church’s experience of that session.
- During the following week the community will then read, discuss, and respond to the Scriptures for the next session, and the worship gathering will once more center around these responses.

This guide can also be used for individual study. You can write out your responses to the questions in a notebook or journal. (However, we really encourage reading and studying the Bible in community!)
DEUTERONOMY
OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

Following an Ancient Form for Treaties
Between Great Kings and Their Subject Kings

Numbers in parentheses refer to sessions in this study guide.

1. Names and titles of the great king (2)
2. Historical prologue: What the great king has done for his subjects (2)
   • A special appeal by the great king’s representative (3)
3. First term of the treaty: exclusive allegiance (3-5)
4. Other terms of the treaty
   • How exclusive allegiance is to be lived out practically (6)
   • Offerings and festivals (7)
   • Community leaders (8)
   • Safeguards of justice (8)
   • Warfare (9)
   • Miscellaneous laws (9)
   • Sexual relations (9)
   • Exclusion from the sanctuary (9)
   • More miscellaneous laws (10)
5. Blessings for keeping the treaty and curses for breaking it (11)
6. Securing the treaty
   • Succession (12)
   • Witnesses (12)
   • Custodians of the treaty copies (12)
   • A song of witness (13)
   • Epilogue: A blessing on the tribes of Israel (14)
Israelites forbidden to attack Ammon
Israelites forbidden to attack Moab
Israelites forbidden to attack Bashan
Israelites forbidden to attack Seir (land of Esau)
Israelites forbidden to attack Bezer
City of refuge
City of refuge
City of refuge
City of refuge
City of refuge

Kadesh Barnea
The Israelites first refuse to invade Canaan, then attack in disobedience and are defeated.
In this session you’ll read together through the whole book of Deuteronomy to appreciate its overall shape and message. This will enable you to recognize, in the sessions ahead, where individual sections fit within the big picture of the book. (You should have arranged a little extra meeting time for your group to do this session.) At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites to read his words out loud again every seven years. By doing the same thing yourselves, you’ll share in an experience that has been the heritage of God’s people since ancient times.

The book of Deuteronomy is a long message that Moses spoke to the people of Israel just before he died around 1400 BC. To help the people follow what he was saying, Moses gave this message a shape they would recognize. He put it in the form that kings of his day used when they made treaties with other kings who were becoming their subjects. This form was made up of a series of elements:

1. First, the great king (the one who was going to rule over the other king) gave his name and listed his royal titles.

2. The great king would then describe all that he’d done for the other king.

3. The terms of the treaty then followed. As the first term, the great king would always insist on exclusive allegiance.
4. He would then specify other terms, such as the payment of tribute or the right to have his armies pass through the other king’s territory.

5. Both kings would then ratify the treaty by calling on their gods to bless them if they kept it and to curse them if they broke it.

6. Finally, each king would say where he was going to keep his copy of the treaty and how he would safeguard it.

You may be familiar with the Ten Commandments in the Bible. (One of the places they’re found is in Deuteronomy.) They’re actually a miniature version of this treaty form, so they provide an excellent brief illustration of it:

1. “I am the Lord your God”: The great king gives his name and title. (When Lord is written in large and small caps, it’s a translation of Yahweh, the special name God used when he made his covenant or solemn agreement with Israel.)

2. “Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”: The great king describes what he’s done for his servants.

3. “You shall have no other gods before me”: The first term of the treaty demands exclusive allegiance.

4. The remaining commandments (“You shall not murder,” “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not steal,” etc.) specify the other terms of the treaty.

5. Some blessings and curses are built right into the commandments, for example, “Honor your father and your mother . . . so that you may live long and that it may go well with you” (blessing); “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (curse).

6. The surrounding text explains that God made two copies of the Ten Commandments, one for him and one for the people of Israel, and asked Moses to take care of both copies. They were safeguarded in a special container called the ark of the covenant. (In this case ark means a kind of box.)

As you read together through the book of Deuteronomy you’ll recognize that it, too, follows this same treaty form, only at greater length. While the
treaty form helps the listeners follow what Moses is saying, it does something more as well. The Lord wants to make a treaty or covenant with the current generation of Israelites so that they will be part of the covenant he made with their parents when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. And so the very form of the message also helps draws the listeners into this new covenant with God.

READING

Have several members of your group who are good at reading out loud, and who enjoy doing so, take turns reading through the book of Deuteronomy. Switch readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. The whole reading should take about two hours. Give everyone a fifteen-minute break about halfway through to have some refreshments and to share their initial impressions informally.

As you listen to the book, notice how it follows the treaty form just described. (In The Books of the Bible, the major parts of the treaty are set off by extra white space.)

1 Since Moses represents the Lord in this treaty, it’s actually his name and titles that are given right at the beginning.

2 Moses next reviews the history of the past forty years in order to describe what the Lord has done for the current generation of Israelites. As you listen to this part of the book, you can find the locations it mentions on the map on page XX.

Then, just before explaining the terms of the treaty, Moses offers a special word of encouragement and challenge for this generation to join in the covenant with the Lord. This begins, “Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you.”

3 Moses states the first term of the treaty: exclusive allegiance. This part of the book begins, “This is the law Moses set before the Israelites.” It includes the Ten Commandments, and it concludes with a reminder that the people will be blessed if they keep the covenant but cursed if they break it (“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse . . .”).
Next, in the longest part of the book, Moses explains the remaining terms of the treaty, the many practical commandments that God has given for the life of the nation in its new land. (This part begins, “These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess.”) You may find some of these commandments puzzling or even offensive. Make a note of the ones you wonder about, as you’ll have the opportunity to ask about them later.

Moses then describes how the people are to ratify the treaty formally once they get into their new land. In an elevated central location, they are to set up a permanent copy of the treaty and shout out curses on anyone who breaks it. (This part of the book begins, “Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: . . . ‘When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster.’”) Moses then explains at length what the blessings will be for keeping the covenant and what the curses will be for breaking it.

Moses knows he’s about to die. He tells the Israelites, “I am now a hundred and twenty years old and I am no longer able to lead you.” In order to safeguard the treaty after his death, he entrusts a copy to the priests who carry the ark of the covenant. He appoints Joshua as his successor and teaches the people a song to remind them to follow God faithfully. He speaks a final blessing on each of the tribes, and then, the book tells us, he dies, after glimpsing from a distance the land the people will soon enter.

DISCUSSION

What was it like to hear an entire book of the Bible read out loud over the course of a couple of hours? How was this experience different from the other ways you’ve encountered the Bible? If you’ve had an experience like this one before, tell the group a little bit about it.
Did the explanation of the treaty form help you follow the flow of the book as you listened? If you’ve read Deuteronomy before, did it make more sense this time around?

What were your favorite parts of the book? What sayings were the most memorable? What things in the book were troubling or puzzling to you? (Keep them in mind and be sure to bring them up when you get back to that part of the book in the sessions ahead.)

If you had the opportunity to gather your family and friends together just before you died and speak to them for a couple of hours, what would you say to them?

You’re a young Israelite who has only known life as a wandering desert nomad. Now you hear that the Lord wants you to cross into a new land and fight its inhabitants for possession of it. You’re to build a settled agricultural society based on a system of laws that differs radically from the way of life in the surrounding nations. All of this is how the Lord wants you to become part of a new covenant he made just a generation earlier. How eager are you to be part of this covenant? What excites you about it? What hesitations and concerns do you have? Do you wish there were some other way to become part of what God is doing through your nation at this point in history?
You’ll now begin discussing the individual sections of the book of Deuteronomy, beginning in this session with its first two parts.

As we noted last time, at the start of a treaty like this we would ordinarily expect the LORD, as the great king, to state his own name and titles. Instead, Moses is identified as the LORD’s representative and his credentials are given. This is because, as we’ll discover a little later in Deuteronomy, each party in this treaty has asked Moses to represent them to the other party. We’ll explore this more when we come to that place in the book.

✦ Question for discussion at this point: If God ever did state all of his names and titles, how long would that take? How many names and titles of God can your group list?

In the second part of the treaty Moses reviews what the LORD has done for the people, to explain why they should worship and serve him as their great king. Moses does this in a lively storytelling form, reliving for these Israelites the significant events of their generation, conveying much of the
Moses describes how God has led the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land.

Information through the words of the characters in his story. These characters include both himself and the Lord. His narrative art is so sophisticated that often one character speaks through the voice of another—sometimes even three layers deep, as when Moses recalls what the Lord told him to tell the people, or when he quotes the people quoting their spies. You’ll have the chance in this session to re-enact this historical review as a drama and then discuss it together.

**READING**

Read the first two parts of Deuteronomy out loud once more, this time as a drama. End where the people reach their present location next to the Jordan River and Moses says, “So we stayed in the valley near Beth Peor.” This reading should take about fifteen minutes. Have people take these parts:

- Narrator (explained below)
- Moses
- The Lord
- The people (spokesperson)
- Spies/explorers (spokesperson)

**NOTES**

The message that Moses gives in the book of Deuteronomy is framed by the comments of a narrator, who sets the stage at the beginning and completes the story at the end. This narrator also makes comments during the course of the book. These show that this person lived at a later time, after the people had entered their new land, and needed to explain words and situations that were no longer familiar. In most current versions of the Bible the narrator’s comments will be in parentheses, for example: “(The Emites used to live there . . .)” The narrator should begin the drama by reading the opening of the book. Moses will then be the first character to speak.
When a character comes to the place where they quote another character, they should stop and allow that character to speak their own words. For example:

Moses: The Lord our God said to us at Horeb,
The Lord: You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance . . .

Pay close attention as you read—the parts change quickly and unexpectedly! Don’t worry if you don’t get it perfectly every time and need to back up to let another reader speak. This just illustrates how seamlessly Moses weaves multiple voices together as he tells this story.

**DISCUSSION**

As Moses describes what the Lord has done for the people of Israel, he alludes to some significant events from earlier in their history, such as God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the nation’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt. However, his main emphasis is on the events the current generation has lived through that demonstrate how the people can rely dependably on God.

✦ Can you describe any significant events that illustrate God’s faithfulness to earlier generations of your family or nation? How do these encourage you today?

✦ What events would you highlight over the course of your own lifetime that have shown you God’s protection, provision, and guidance? Draw a timeline of your life. Divide it into significant periods and mark where these events occurred along the way. Then share with the group what you’ve learned from this exercise.

The turning point for the previous generation came at Kadesh Barnea. There the people first refused to advance into the land God promised them, despite assurances of his help. Then they launched a foolhardy and
Moses describes how God has led the Israelites to the edge of the Promised Land. Moses recounts these events for the current generation in the hopes that they will see their part in the story and carry it forward to its originally intended conclusion by taking possession of the land—this time in obedience to God’s directions.

Put yourself in this story by retelling one of its significant episodes from the perspective of a character who was involved:

- The events at Kadesh Barnea, from the perspective of Caleb.
- The passage through Seir, Moab, and Ammon, from the perspective of an Israelite woman who approaches some local women to buy food and water.
- The battle against Sihon, from the perspective of one of the messengers Moses sends to negotiate peace with him.
- What does it do for you to imagine how these different participants experienced the story?

By contrast to the peaceful way the Israelites are told to pass through some other territories, the Lord commands them to attack and destroy the people of Heshbon and Bashan. In fact, Moses says, God will actually make Sihon the king of Heshbon stubborn and obstinate so that he won’t accept terms of peace when they’re offered. The Israelites wipe out these nations and take over their territory.

Readers of the Bible are often deeply disturbed by incidents like these. It’s difficult to see how they are consistent with its overall message about a loving and forgiving God. It’s even difficult to understand their place in the book of Deuteronomy, which describes the people’s responsibility to create a society that will be a model for other nations of the harmony, fairness, and peace that prevail when things are done as God intends. While these incidents are the exception rather than the rule in God’s dealings with humanity, their presence in the Bible leaves many troubling and unanswered questions.

How would you account for episodes in the Bible where whole populations are exterminated? Choose the answer below that best expresses your thoughts, or give one of your own:
a. God must have known that the rulers and people of Heshbon and Bashan were wicked beyond the possibility of reform, and that’s why he used the Israelites as special agents of an exceptional divine judgment against them. The prohibition against attacking the other three nations shows that the Israelites couldn’t destroy anyone they wanted to, just to get their land.

b. Incidents like these happen at a time when the ethic of love hadn’t yet been fully developed or articulated. It’s not fair to judge these Israelites by the standards we know today. They were doing what they believed to be permissible by the standards of their own time.

c. As the story of God is told over the course of the Bible, it presents us with a variety of moral choices that people make. All of these ultimately have to be judged in light of the example and teachings of Jesus, which are the culmination of the story. It’s fair to say that some of the moral choices recorded in the Bible don’t point to this culmination the way others do.

d. These are dark and troubling passages and there’s no good way to explain them. They should continue to bother us, even horrify us, and so spur us on to treat others with greater compassion and respect.
Now that Moses has described what the great king has done for his subjects, the usual form dictates that he should start listing the terms of the treaty. But before he does this, he makes an impassioned appeal to the people. “Hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you,” he calls out, “follow them so that you may live.” Moses describes how the people’s loyalty to God will create a society that’s a model for all nations. But he also warns them what disasters they will experience if they turn away from God. As he then begins to describe exclusive allegiance as the primary term of this covenant treaty, he repeats the Ten Commandments that God first gave the nation a generation earlier as a foundation for their community life.

In his appeal, and as he begins to explain the terms of the treaty, Moses describes the current generation of Israelites as if they had been active participants in the events of the previous generation. “The LORD took you and brought you . . . out of Egypt,” he says, “The LORD spoke to you at Horeb”—even though his listeners were at most only children at the time of these events, and many had not yet been born. Moses speaks this way because he understands that God wants to include this generation in the covenant he made with their ancestors. “Because he loved your ancestors,” he explains, “he chose their descendants after them.” And so, Moses insists, “It was not
with our ancestors that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.” God’s covenant relationship with humanity is not an artifact of history, but a living entity that is made afresh with every successive generation.

READING

Have someone read Moses’ appeal, beginning where you left off last time and ending with the narrator’s notice of how Moses set aside three cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan. (This was the last thing he needed to do before sending the people across the river into their new land. You can find these cities on the map on page XX.)

Then have someone read the beginning of the next part of the book, where Moses describes exclusive loyalty and obedience to the Lord as the first requirement of this treaty. When you get to the Ten Commandments, for emphasis, have the members of your group take turns reading one commandment each. Then have the original reader continue to the point where Moses says, “Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.”

DISCUSSION

Even as Moses says repeatedly that the Lord has chosen the Israelites to be his own people, he also stresses that this gives them the responsibility of demonstrating God’s reality and goodness to all other nations. The surrounding peoples are supposed to admire the just and ordered society that the Israelites build by following God’s laws, and this is supposed to attract them to faith in the Lord.

✦ As the biblical story unfolds in the centuries after Deuteronomy, the Scriptures continue to emphasize that if the people of God can create a harmonious community with high-quality relationships, this will attract others to faith. In the New Testament the followers of Jesus become the people of God. Today what role does the
Moses urges the current generation of Israelites to join in God’s covenant

quality of relationships among Jesus’ followers play in attracting people to faith? Is this more or less important than the role played by individual believers’ personal character and spoken witness? Explain your answer.

Moses warns the Israelites that if they turn away from the Lord and worship idols or other gods, they’ll be defeating the purpose for which God has chosen them, and he’ll have to deal with them very severely. He urges them to remember “what the Lord did at Baal Peor.” The story of what happened there is told a little earlier in the Bible. The Moabites who lived there were able to undermine the people’s loyalty to the Lord by having their young women invite the young Israelite men to a festival in honor of their local god. In the midst of feasting and carousing and sex, many of the Israelites worshipped this other god, and the Lord destroyed them with a plague. While the penalty was severe, the stakes were high: The distinctive identity of God’s chosen people was at risk.

Do you know anyone who has moved away from following Jesus because of a romantic attraction or attachment to someone who wasn’t a believer? Conversely, do you know anyone who has come to faith in Jesus because of a romantic interest in a believer? Tell these stories discreetly if you can. What measures can a follower of Jesus take to make sure that in any romantic relationship they’re influencing the other person toward faith, and they’re not being influenced away from faith?

The Ten Commandments are a brief but powerful moral code because they teach general principles through specific rules that can be applied to a wide range of contexts. The literal application of these rules is narrow, but they all provoke reflection on their underlying principles, and these can speak to a broad variety of situations. For example, the commandment against giving false testimony applies strictly to giving evidence in court. But the principle behind it is that we should always speak honestly and truthfully, knowing that what we say affects all those around us. This principle applies much more widely.
Divide your group into teams of two or three people and divide the Ten Commandments up among these teams. Have them discuss the following questions and then report their answers back to the whole group:

- What specific conduct was each commandment requiring or forbidding in its original context?
- What would this correspond to in our own day?
- What is the basic principle behind this commandment?
- What other kinds of actions would this principle encourage or discourage?

After reviewing the Ten Commandments, Moses reminds the people why he is representing the Lord in this treaty, just as he was already representing them. At Horeb (Mount Sinai) the people were so terrified by the display of God’s power that they were afraid to deal with him directly. So they asked Moses to go up on the mountain, listen to what God said, and report back to them. The Lord said he was pleased that the people were inclined to fear him in this way. He wished they always would.

What do you think it would have been like to stand at the foot of a mountain that was blazing with fire and hear God’s voice booming out of the flames? Would you like to have an experience like this? Why or why not?

Should we be afraid of God? Why, or why not? Do we need someone to represent God to us? If so, why, and who could do that? If not, why not?
INTRODUCTION

Moses now describes at greater length the specific ways in which the Israelites are to give their exclusive allegiance to the Lord, as the first term of this treaty. He tells them that they are to love the Lord with their whole heart, soul, and strength. They are to fear him, and so not dare to disobey him; they are to swear all of their oaths in his name alone; they are to keep all of his commandments.

They must also eliminate any influence that could possibly lead them away from the Lord. This means that they must drive out all of the nations already living in the land of Canaan. They must not make any treaties with them or intermarry with their families. They must destroy all of their idols along with their royal monuments and inscriptions. While these measures are extreme, only in this way will the Israelites be able to live out their destiny as the nation that the Lord “has chosen . . . out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”
READING

Have group members take turns reading a paragraph at a time as you continue through this part of Deuteronomy, beginning where you left off last time and ending where Moses says, “Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.” (Some other versions have “stubborn people.” Please note that the traditional chapter divisions are not helpful here, and in some versions this break will be in the middle of a paragraph.)

DISCUSSION

So that the people of Israel will keep God’s covenant down through their generations, Moses stresses repeatedly that parents should be constantly teaching their children about what God has done for them and about how God wants them to live. Sometimes this will be in response to the children’s questions about why they need to keep certain commandments. But at other times it will be because the parents have designed and created specific opportunities for teaching in a variety of situations.

 Describe how parents could use one of the following contexts as a setting to teach their children something about God:

- sitting at home
- traveling
- bedtime
- morning wake-up

In your answer you can describe something your parents did with you, or something you’ve done with your children or with other young people in your life, or something you think would be enjoyable and effective.

 What’s the best answer you’ve ever received to a “how come” or “why” question you asked about faith?
Some Israelites in later generations have taken Moses’ words here literally and attached to the doorposts of their homes miniature scrolls inscribed with the commandment to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and strength. They’ve also put similar scrolls in small leather boxes and strapped them on their foreheads and upper arms during prayers. Jesus’ followers today have some corresponding practices, such as displaying plaques bearing Bible verses in their homes, wearing WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets, and getting tattoos that are reminders and declarations of their faith. What do you think of such practices? Which ones do you follow yourself?

Moses repeatedly promises the people that if they will commit themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord in the ways he describes, they will become very prosperous. He even says that by giving them the ability to produce wealth, God will be confirming his covenant with them.

Look back through the reading and list all of the resources and material advantages Moses promises that the people will enjoy in their new land. (Once you’ve made your list, you can compare it with the one at the end of this session.) Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Why? “Everything else being equal, a person whose character is shaped by sincere faith in God will be more prosperous than they would be if they didn’t have this kind of faith.”

Moses also cautions the people, however, about the dangers of prosperity. He warns them that they may abandon God if they think their own ability or moral superiority is responsible for their wealth. What are some good ways for a person to guard against this attitude?

Moses even tells the people that God made them destitute in the desert, dependent on him for their daily food and drink, to humble them and test them “so that in the end it might go well with you.” Have you ever learned something important about
God and yourself from a time when you couldn’t provide all the resources you needed? If so, tell the group about this experience.

To prevent the Israelites from being attracted to other gods, the Lord commands them to destroy all of the sculptures, monuments, inscriptions, etc. associated with those gods. This is a necessary measure in a context where the people are surrounded by idol-worshipping nations and can easily be overwhelmed by their influence. In other contexts, however, people of faith have taken over images, monuments, locations, etc. that were formerly dedicated to other gods and found ways to assert that all the fruits of nature and human culture rightfully belong to the true God. In England, for example, rather than tear down a monolith (tall stone) originally set up on a hilltop by the Druids, followers of Jesus chiseled a cross through the top of the stone to claim the location and monument for him. The place is now known as Rudston, from “rood,” an older English word for cross, and “stone.”

What other examples can you give of things originally dedicated to other gods or idols that have been reclaimed by followers of Jesus as rightfully his? In what contexts does this practice pose risks for believers? In what contexts can it be carried out more safely and meaningfully?

In March 2001 the Taliban destroyed two huge statues of Buddha in Afghanistan’s Bamyan Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, on the grounds that they were idols. How do you feel about this?

NOTE

Discussion point 2, question 1, List of material advantages: milk, honey, cities, houses, wells, vineyards, olive groves, children, calves, lambs, grain, wine, olive oil, wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, fresh water, iron, copper, silver, gold.
MOSES REVIEWS THE NATION’S PAST DISLOYALTY AS A NEGATIVE EXAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

As Moses continues to stress the people’s obligation to be devoted exclusively to the Lord, he now offers a further historical recollection. This time he doesn’t explain what the great king has done for his subjects. Instead, he describes what they’ve failed to do for him. He reminds the Israelites how, even as he was on Mount Sinai speaking with God, they made a golden calf and worshipped it. He also reminds them of the many times they disobeyed God’s commands and failed to trust him at different places along their journey. All of this illustrates, unfortunately by negative example, what exclusive allegiance means: (1) not serving anyone else, and (2) actually obeying the one you’re supposed to be serving.

After this recollection, Moses concludes this part of the treaty by describing the Lord’s gracious character, by stressing the importance of keeping his commandments, and by outlining the covenant ratification ceremony the people must conduct when they reach their new land. He’ll give much more detailed instructions about this ceremony in the fifth part of the treaty. The preliminary mention of it here helps mark off the end of this part of the book.
READING

Have group members take turns reading a paragraph at a time through to the end of this third part of Deuteronomy. Begin where you left off last time (“Remember this and never forget how you aroused the anger of the Lord your God in the wilderness.”) End where Moses says, “When you have taken it over and are living there, be sure that you obey all the decrees and laws I am setting before you today.”

DISCUSSION

Earlier parts of the Bible provide the details of how the people rebelled and disobeyed at the places Moses mentions in his historical recollection:

- At Taberah, the people infuriated God by their endless complaining.
- At Massah, when they had no water, they accused the Lord of bringing them into the desert to make them die of thirst.
- At Kibroth-hattaavah, they grumbled about the food God provided.
- And at Kadesh Barnea, as we noted in session 2, they disobeyed God by first refusing to fight, and then by fighting when he told them not to.

These kinds of public actions—grumbling and complaining about God, questioning whether he cares, acting as if he doesn’t know best—are particularly infuriating to God because when they’re performed by those who are supposed to be in a close relationship with him, they undermine his reputation in the eyes of the rest of the world.

🔍 About how often do you complain about God or question his intentions out loud?

- Two or three times a year or less
- Probably about once a month
- More than once a week
- Maybe several times a day
What would be some good ways to start doing this less often, with the goal of eventually stopping entirely? In other words, what practices can a person cultivate that would be the antidotes to complaining, questioning, and disobedience?

Outward expressions of religious faith can require the investment of significant resources and creativity. To make the calf idol, the people needed to donate enough gold for a large statue. Individuals with artistic talent and technical skill had to design a mold. Others had to melt down the gold, remove the impurities, pour the purified metal accurately into the mold, and make sure it cooled evenly so the statue didn’t crack. (The Israelites would have had the opportunity to learn these skills in Egypt.) The people didn’t simply slip carelessly into worshipping another god. The community and its leaders were all involved and invested in a lengthy and expensive creative process.

When the LORD forgave the people for turning against him and agreed to renew his relationship with them, he called upon Moses similarly to use his creativity to craft new tokens of his covenant with Israel. Moses had to chisel out two stone tablets and design an ark (a decorative box) out of wood. But when the time came to inscribe the Ten Commandments on the tablets, the LORD himself did the calligraphy, writing them out in his own hand. God himself invested creatively in the outward expressions of the people’s faith in him.

But the state of the people’s relationship with God was evidenced through destruction as well as through creation. Moses smashed a first set of stone tablets to show that the people had violated their covenant with the LORD. He also destroyed the calf idol to keep the people from worshipping it as their god. Sometimes cultural artifacts can be reclaimed for God, as we saw in session 4. But at other times, as we see here, they can’t be reclaimed.

How do you picture the stone tablets that Moses chiseled out? How about the wooden container he designed? (What comparable items are there in your own culture?) What do you think God’s writing on the tablets looked like?
In what way have you and those around you invested your creativity in the worship and service of God? This could include things such as musical composition or performance, decorating, architecture and design, construction, landscaping, artwork, calligraphy, liturgy, writing, public reading, drama, cuisine, and so forth. When you invest your creativity in this way, do you experience this as a special act of devotion to God?

The name and titles of the great king aren’t listed at the beginning of this treaty, since Moses is representing him. However, Moses does give them here, as his challenge to exclusive allegiance reaches its culmination: “The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome.” In some cases ancient emperors and kings included descriptions of their achievements and responsibilities among their titles. (To give a contemporary example, in addition to having territorial titles, the British monarch is called “Defender of the Faith.”) And so it’s likely that the divine actions Moses describes here are meant to be included among God’s royal titles: “Who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes; he defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner.” This great king paradoxically demonstrates his awesome might by the way he defends the weak, needy, and vulnerable. The qualities of justice and compassion are built into his name—they constitute an essential part of who he is. We’ll see these qualities demonstrated over and over again in the next part of the book, in the laws that make up the specific terms of the treaty.

Do you see compassion for the weak and needy as such an essential characteristic of God that it defines who he is—even ahead of other achievements such as creating the world and redeeming humanity from the guilt and power of sin? Is this the way you’re used to hearing God portrayed? How could your community of faith emphasize this aspect of God’s character in its worship, fellowship, and service?
INTRODUCTION

We now come to the fourth part of the book of Deuteronomy. You’ll notice that it begins with a reference to the “decrees and laws” that God is giving the people, just as the previous two parts of the book did. This is how Deuteronomy marks the beginning of its major sections.

In keeping with the treaty form, this part explains the specific terms of the covenant between the Israelites and the LORD—the duties they owe him as their great king. These duties are enumerated in a series of laws that are designed to shape the Israelite community into a society that will be a model for other nations.

In this treaty the laws are organized into groups based on the subjects and situations they address. Within these groups, the laws discuss a limited number of examples in order to illustrate general principles that will provide guidance for broader areas of life.

Groups of laws that share a common theme are placed together. The first three groups of laws, which you’ll consider in this session, have as their theme the means by which the primary term of the treaty—exclusive allegiance to the LORD—is to be lived out practically.
The first group of specific laws in Deuteronomy illustrates the principle that the Israelites must not worship the Lord in the same way that the former inhabitants of the land worshipped their gods. Have someone read this group of laws aloud, beginning where you left off last time and ending with, “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.”

These laws specify two ways in which the Israelites’ worship must be different from that of the nations they are displacing.

First, they must offer their sacrifices only at a central sanctuary in a place that God will designate (ultimately Jerusalem). By contrast, the Canaanites offered sacrifices all over the land in locations they considered sacred for various reasons: on the tops of mountains and hills, which held commanding positions and were closer to the sky; under the shade of great trees, which were emblems of fertility; and next to large rocks, which represented power and were also thought to be places where oracles might be given.

Second, the Israelites are not to consume the blood from their sacrifices. The Canaanites drank this blood because they believed they could absorb the life force of the sacrificed animal if they did. Since the animal was being offered to a god, this force would be even more powerful.

These forbidden practices point to the basic premise of Canaanite religion: Supernatural power is resident within the natural world, and people can tap into it by following magical rituals. If the people of Israel adopted the forms of this religion, they’d be buying into the quest for power themselves, and this would lead them to shape their society on the wrong principles. It would only be a short step from there to worshipping other gods and forsaking their loyalty to the Lord.

This group of laws helps undercut the idea that nature is infused with magical power by specifying that Israelites can slaughter animals without this being a sacred act—it can simply satisfy a craving for meat. On these occasions the animals can be slaughtered in a person’s home town; they don’t need to be brought to the central sanctuary. But the blood must still not be consumed.
Even though God is not immersed in the natural world, God can still be encountered through nature and natural forces. (Earlier in the book, for example, Moses described how the Israelites had a terrifying encounter with God through the dark clouds and blazing fire at Mount Sinai.) Share with the group one or two of the most meaningful experiences you’ve had encountering God through nature.

In your culture, do some people consider nature itself to be sacred? If so, how do they express this belief? Does such a belief pose a danger for followers of Jesus?

On a trip through Scotland you stay at a bed and breakfast. In the morning your hostess offers you a sausage she calls “black pudding” with your eggs, toast, and jam. When you ask what it is, she explains that it’s made from blood. Do you try it? If not, is this for religious reasons, or just a matter of taste?

The next group of laws describes measures that the Israelites are to take if anyone within their nation tries to promote the worship of other gods. Have three people read the different laws in this group, starting at these places:

• “If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you . . .”
• “If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love . . .”
• “If you hear it said about one of the towns . . .” (ending, “keeping all his commands that I am giving you today and doing what is right in his eyes”).

These laws address three extreme cases to illustrate that in every case the Israelites must purge from their nation anyone who promotes the worship of other gods—even if it’s a prophet or seer who does an amazing sign, even if it’s a dear loved one, even if it’s an entire town. The measures specified may strike us as excessive: public execution of the individuals and destruction of the entire town. These measures would not be appropriate today, when the
people of God are a multinational community scattered among countries that are supposed to allow religious freedom. But the purpose of the measures within the ancient Israelite society is clear: Worship of other gods is like a cancer that must be cut out of a body, because otherwise it will spread and become fatal. “You must purge the evil from among you,” Moses insists. In fact, these laws embody such a horror of anyone and anything contaminated by this worship that they stipulate execution of the offending individuals by stoning—from a distance, without contact—and the entire destruction of the town’s buildings and goods by fire.

✈️ If a follower of Jesus became aware that the influence of another person in their life was making it increasingly difficult for them to serve and obey God, and nothing gave them hope that this would ever change, would it be advisable for them to get out of the situation even if this required:

- breaking an engagement to be married?
- leaving a well-paying job with no immediate prospects of new employment?
- packing up and moving to a different neighborhood or city?

3 The third group of laws describes more ritual practices the Israelites are not to adopt. Most of the laws have to do with foods that can and cannot be eaten. Have someone read these laws out loud, beginning with “You are the children of the LORD your God” and ending “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

In the ancient world, certain animals were considered “detestable.” Creatures of the earth, sea, and sky were supposed to move and feed in ways appropriate to their realms. If they didn’t, they were anomalous within the general category to which they belonged, and so they were cosmologically dangerous. The Canaanites would eat such animals on ritual occasions to try to manipulate magic forces to their advantage. The Israelites, by contrast, were to scrupulously avoid eating them, to stay out of the quest for power and to respect the order of the created world.
These laws consider land animals first, explaining what makes them clean (acceptable as food): They need to walk on divided hooves, and they need to feed as ruminants, chewing the cud. These principles are illustrated with several examples and counter-examples.

Creatures of the water are considered next, and no examples are given, only the principles that make them clean or unclean: They must swim with fins and have scales (perhaps as a definite boundary between their solid bodies and the water).

Finally, creatures of the air are considered, and this time there are only examples, no principles. However, interpreters have suggested several likely principles: Flying creatures are unclean if they hunt and kill land animals; if they eat dead flesh; if they fly at night rather than during the day; if they feed in the water; if they dig in the ground for food; or if they fly in swarms. If you read through the list again you’ll recognize how the various creatures fit these categories. (The hoopoe is the bird that digs in the ground for its food.)

The prohibition against eating scavenger birds illustrates that the Israelites were to respect the boundary between life and death. This same principle accounts for the law at the beginning of this group against making marks on one’s body for the dead and for the law near the end of the group against eating animals that are found dead. The final law, against cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk, is prohibiting another magical fertility ritual of the Canaanites. It’s included in this group because it relates to eating.

 Equity Every individual and culture in the world today still sets boundaries that determine what they will and won’t eat. The rationale may not be the same as here in Deuteronomy, and the boundaries may or may not be explicitly religious, but they are there nonetheless. For example, some cultures will eat meat from pigs (as ham, pork, and bacon) but not from dogs; other cultures will eat dog meat but not pig meat. The same applies to cows vs. horses, sheep vs. goats, and so forth. Some cultures will eat insects such as locusts and ants, while others won’t. Some people will eat certain organs, such as the liver, but not other organs, such as the brains and eyes, which people elsewhere prize as delicacies. Reflect for a moment and recognize your own food boundaries.
What principles determine them? For example, if you won’t eat meat from horses and dogs, is this because you consider those animals to be partners with humans in work and sport? If you won’t eat brains or eyes, is this because these organs represent for you a creature’s rationality and relationality, and you feel that those should be kept inviolate—that is to say, sacred? In other words, if a certain potential food seems disgusting (“detestable”) to you, why does it feel this way? By respecting the principles behind your food limits, are you trying to honor God?
INTRODUCTION

In this session you’ll look at more terms of the covenant between the LORD and the Israelites. You’ll consider several more groups of laws, which are once again placed together because they have a common theme.

This fourth part of the book began with a description of the central sanctuary the Israelites were to establish in their new land to prevent the people from worshipping on hilltops and in shrines and groves like the Canaanites. This introduced the theme of the groups of laws you considered last time: how the Israelites’ worship was to differ from that of the nations they were displacing.

The central sanctuary also introduces the next larger theme in this part of the treaty, since it was the place where the people would come to celebrate their annual religious festivals. When they did, they would bring gifts and offerings with them to support the worship center and its personnel and also to provide for the poor and needy. The next several groups of laws in the book address this theme of generosity in the context of worship.
**READING**

Have people take turns reading the following groups of laws, beginning at the places indicated:

- On bringing a tithe (tenth) of the year’s produce to support the sanctuary and care for the poor: “Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.” (The people would enjoy a celebratory meal with the priests, inviting the poor to join them, and then donate the rest of the produce to the sanctuary.)
- On canceling debts and freeing Hebrew slaves every seventh year: “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.”
- On sacrificing firstborn animals to the Lord: “Set apart for the Lord your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks.”
- On observing the annual religious festivals: “Observe the month of Aviv and celebrate the Passover of the Lord your God.” (End with, “Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.” If you’re using another Bible translation, note that this reading ends just before the laws about judges.)

**DISCUSSION**

pressão These laws explain the two main sources of support for the sanctuary and the needy in the community: a tenth of every year’s produce, plus all healthy male firstborn animals. These were symbolic acknowledgments of God as provider and redeemer. Work together as a group to see if you can explain the symbolism behind giving a tenth and offering firstborn males. You can compare your thoughts with the suggestions at the end of this session.

ério Should followers of Jesus today give a tenth of their income to God? If so, should they give all of it to their church, or can they also give some of it to help the needy?
Every third year the tithe was gathered and stored locally to provide for the poor. These were the food banks of ancient Israel. Are there food banks or soup kitchens in your community? Have any of your group members volunteered there? If so, ask them to share about their experiences. Your group may wish to arrange a time to serve together at one of these places.

If debts were cancelled every seven years, why do you think a person would ever repay a loan before then? Give some reasons why they might do this.

The laws answer the related question of why a person would ever make a loan that might not be repaid: They should see the loan as a gift that God will bless them for giving. Does someone have a financial obligation to you that you can lessen or cancel as a gift in honor of God?

What are your favorite religious festivals or holidays? What do they commemorate? How do you like to celebrate them? Are they occasions to help the poor, like the ones described here? Share with the group one of your favorite memories from a religious holiday.

NOTE

Suggested answers to first discussion question: Ten is the number of humanity in the Bible, since people ordinarily have ten fingers and ten toes. So giving a tenth is an admission of our human dependence, as finite creatures, on an infinite God.

In the final plague that freed the people from slavery, all the firstborn Egyptian males were slain, but their Israelite counterparts were spared. Offering firstborn animals back to God recalls this deliverance.
THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

The shared theme of the next several groups of laws in this fourth part of Deuteronomy is once again introduced by a reference to the central sanctuary. This was also a place where people could come to have difficult legal disputes settled by priests and judges. Accordingly, the book now presents several groups of laws that relate to the administration of justice. The first few groups describe the community’s legal and religious leadership; a final group then describes how several specific safeguards are to be maintained in the interests of justice.

READING AND DISCUSSION

1 Have different members of your group take turns reading the following groups of laws that describe the community’s leadership, beginning at the places indicated:

- On local judges and their conduct: “Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town.”
• On the requirements for witnesses in local trials: “Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the LORD your God.” (This group of laws is related to the work of local judges; its principles are illustrated by a case of worshipping other gods, after reminders that this is prohibited.)

• On the judges and priests at the sanctuary: “If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge . . .” (Other translations may begin something like this: “If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you . . .”)

• On the kind of king the nation may have: “When you enter the land . . . and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us . . .’”

• On the Levites and their support: “The Levitical priests—indeed, the whole tribe of Levi . . .”

• On the prophets who will provide divine guidance, instead of sorcerers and diviners: “When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there” (ending, “That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed”).

Deuteronomy provides specific guidelines for the qualifications of community leaders and how they are to administer justice. Judges must not take bribes. At least two witnesses are required for a conviction. Difficult matters should be brought to the central court. Kings are subject to numerous restraints. All of these measures are designed to prevent the perversion of justice and the abuse of power. Has your society adopted similar safeguards or checks-and-balances? If so, describe some of them. If you feel, on the other hand, that your society is not really under the rule of law, explain how it got that way.
Give group members the opportunity to mention the names and occupations of people they feel are serving God honestly and with integrity by establishing and maintaining justice in your society: judges, lawyers, government leaders, law enforcement officers, etc. In your group’s prayer time, give thanks for the people who are named and ask God to give them wisdom and strength to uphold justice through their work.

The tribe of Levi was set apart for service in the sanctuary, so Levites did not have their own crops and herds. They depended on the people’s gifts to sustain them in their work. Do you know anyone who works for God in a context where they don’t produce their own income, so they must depend on gifts from those who are interested in their work and want to see it succeed? If so, tell the group about them and about any ways in which you’ve been able to support them. Remember these people in your prayer time as well.

The Canaanites relied on sorcery, witchcraft, divination, omens, etc. to try to get supernatural guidance. The Lord told the Israelites to forsake all of these practices and rely instead on the prophets he would send them. How widespread are occult practices in your society? Which ones are most common? If any of your group members were formerly involved in the occult and have now left that realm as followers of Jesus, give them the opportunity to share their story if they wish.

Do you feel you’ve ever received prophetic guidance from God? If so, by what means did you receive it? What makes you believe it came from God? What guidelines does Deuteronomy provide for determining whether a prophetic message is truly from God? Do you think followers of Jesus should seek prophetic guidance more often?
Continuing the theme of administration of justice, the next group of laws describes three safeguards that are designed to protect people from being defrauded or prosecuted unfairly:

- If a person was murdered in ancient Israel, a member of their clan would assume the role of “avenger of blood.” They would track down the murderer and kill them in revenge. Three cities of refuge were designated on each side of the Jordan River to protect accidental killers from these avengers.

- In ancient Israel large stones were set at the corners of properties to mark their boundaries. It could not go undetected if a neighbor moved these stones to expand their own holdings, so land thieves usually only preyed on those they thought would be too weak to fight back, such as widows and orphans.

- After repeating the law first given in the section on local trials against convicting a person based on the testimony of one witness, Deuteronomy now provides a further safeguard against false accusations by specifying the penalty for perjury. A false witness must suffer the same damages they were seeking against the defendant, up to and including the death penalty. This is designed to be a strong deterrent: “The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.”

Have different people read the laws relating to each of these safeguards, beginning at these places:

- On cities of refuge: “When the Lord your God has destroyed the nations whose land he is giving you . . .”

- On boundary markers (just one sentence): “Do not move your neighbor’s boundary stone . . .”

- On standards for witnesses: “One witness is not enough to convict anyone,” ending, “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

The laws about accidental killings give the illustration of an axe head flying off and striking someone. What other examples can you give of how a person might be killed unintentionally?
In the case discussed at the end of this group of laws, what is the evidence that the killing wasn’t accidental? What protections and support does your society provide in cases of unintentional killings? Do you know anyone who’s killed someone without meaning to? Tell their story briefly, if you’re free to. Has this person been supported and protected through this experience? If so, how?

 água No penalty is specified in the law against moving boundary markers, but what do you think would be an appropriate punishment for anyone caught stealing land in this way? What means do people use today to try to steal wealth or property from others? Whom do they typically target? If anyone in the group has advocated for a victim of property theft, let them tell their story.

 água Has anyone ever tried to ruin your reputation or take something valuable from you by telling lies about you in an official setting? If so, what happened? What kind of deterrent might have kept this person from attempting this?
THE CONCERN FOR JUSTICE EXPANDS INTO A VISION FOR DOING RIGHT BY OTHERS

INTRODUCTION

As the laws in the book of Deuteronomy continue to set forth the specific terms of the covenant between the Israelites and the LORD, the concern for legal justice expands into a larger vision for doing right by others generally. The new society, as a model for all other nations, is to be one in which people treat each other honestly, fairly, respectfully, and generously. The laws here explore how this can happen in a variety of spheres in life. While, in some cases, groups of laws on the same subject are still discernible, often in this section of the book the laws are connected by somewhat looser associations.
READING AND DISCUSSION

Have someone read the next several laws in the book, which all relate to the way the nation is to conduct itself in warfare, beginning, “When you go to war against your enemies” and ending, “you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.”

Down through the centuries followers of Jesus have held two different views about warfare. Some have argued for pacifism, the idea that wars should never be fought. Others have argued for the idea of a just war—that wars are sometimes unavoidable, but they must still be fought for valid reasons and with proper restraint. Search online for a summary of “just war principles.” (For example, www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/justwar.htm.) Have someone read these aloud and let the group discuss them briefly to make sure everyone understands them. Then give each person the opportunity to say whether they’re more inclined toward the pacifist position or the just war position.

While pacifists and just war advocates both find support for their positions in various parts of the Scriptures, here in Deuteronomy the perspective is that of a just war. Explain how, within this perspective, soldiers in ancient Israel could do right by others by following each of these laws in warfare:

- Making engaged men and the owners of new homes and vineyards exempt from fighting.
- Giving the people of an opposing city the opportunity to surrender and live.
- Not cutting down fruit trees to build siege works.

Are there some regulations here that don’t seem to you to fit the principles of a just war? If so, which ones? How would you account for them?
The next series of laws addresses a variety of different life situations, but the overall theme is still that of doing right by others. However, a few of these laws are intended instead to forbid Canaanite-style magical practices, specifically the mixing or confusion of different or opposite things. Nevertheless, they often share a common vocabulary with the other laws here. For example, the law against yoking an ox and donkey together uses the same terms as the laws about helping a fallen ox or donkey on the road and about returning these animals when someone loses them. This section doesn’t follow modern notions of classification, but the Hebrew mind delighted in verbal associations like these. Many compositions within the Hebrew Scriptures or First Testament (also known as the Old Testament1) are put together along these lines.

Have people take turns reading these laws (this will be one paragraph each in most Bibles), beginning with “If someone is found slain, lying in a field” and ending, “Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.” (This last law also seems to be concerned with maintaining boundaries in some way; the tassels recall the stones on the corners of property.)

Each of these laws teaches a principle that people should follow in order to do right by others. For example, the law about a body found in a field teaches that when individual responsibility cannot be determined, those who would then be held corporately responsible should be given the opportunity to clear their names. The law about the foreign woman captured in warfare teaches that it’s not right to take or accept something from someone on the premise that they’re going to have a certain status or relationship with you, if you then deny that to them.

Explain the principles behind the rest of the laws you’ve just read and give examples, if you can, of how people today could uphold the principles implicit in these laws. (As noted above, several of the laws are intended to forbid the mixing of different or opposite things in the pursuit of magical power.)

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1The term First Testament is used here to correspond with the usage in The Books of the Bible, and also because the book of Hebrews, which we’ll consider in the second half of this guide, contrasts the “new covenant” that God made through Jesus with the “first covenant” that God made through Moses. Testament and covenant mean the same thing.
The next group of laws is concerned for how people can do right by one another in the area of sexual relations. Some of these laws will be very troubling to modern audiences, such as the ones that prescribe the death penalty for acts between consenting adults, or the one that has a rapist marry his victim. It’s difficult to understand and appreciate these laws across the distance that separates us from the ancient and largely foreign culture in which they were elaborated. But working to understand the principles behind them can at least get us some way toward that goal, even if we remain troubled by the differences between the way the principles were worked out in ancient Israel and the way we would prefer to see them expressed in our own societies. Have someone read these laws, beginning with “If a man takes a wife...” and ending, “he must not dishonor his father’s bed.” (During the reading and discussion be especially sensitive to group members who may have experienced sexual abuse or violence.)

In terms of positive principles underlying these laws, where do you see:

- Protections for women against unfounded accusations of sexual immorality?
- Provision for a woman who would otherwise be left destitute?
- Measures to prevent inappropriate sexual relations within families?
- Measures to prevent sexual relations outside of marriage? (What would you say is the goal of these measures?)

How could your own society uphold these positive principles in appropriate ways?

If you could make one change in your own society’s sexual mores that you feel would make them better conformed to godly ideals, what would that change be?

The next group of laws explains which people should be excluded from the “assembly of the Lord” (that is, from the worship of the community, around which its life centers) and from the army’s encampment. Have
someone who’s comfortable with mature subject matter read these laws, beginning where the last reader left off and ending with, “Your camp must be holy, so that [the Lord] will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you.”

Various concerns lie behind the different laws in this group:

- Sacrificing one’s manhood to the goddess Asherah was another magical practice of the Canaanites that the people were not to imitate.
- Descendants of Moabites and Ammonites were excluded from the community because these nations didn’t help the Israelites when they were hungry and thirsty refugees coming out of Egypt. (This is a negative example of failing to do right by others.)
- The man described in the law about the encampment has to be isolated temporarily because vital fluids have passed out of his body; the understanding in this culture is that the integrity of the boundaries of his body has been compromised, and time must pass for that integrity to be restored.
- For similar reasons people must be outside the camp when excrement passes out of their bodies.

Once again the cultural context may feel strange and remote, but the principles can be applied to our own situations today.

- A friend from your church is recovering well from cancer. Everyone has been praying for her and is eager to see her again. You visit her and encourage her to come back to church if she’s feeling well enough. She says that she is, but then adds that she doesn’t feel comfortable seeing everyone until her hair, which fell out during chemotherapy, has grown back. Do you tell her she doesn’t need to feel this way, that everyone will welcome and accept her as she is, or do you agree to let her wait?

- Another friend has visited your church with you several times. On this visit the pastor explains about communion and invites the believers present to take part. Your friend says to you, “I can’t say
that I’m a follower of Jesus yet, but I think this would help me on my spiritual journey.” Do you encourage this friend to take part, or rather to observe?
INTRODUCTION

This fourth section of the book of Deuteronomy concludes with a series of laws that address a variety of situations. Their shared principle is, “No cheating.” Cheating encompasses a wide range of things. It includes open acts, such as taking advantage of someone who is vulnerable and defenseless by exploiting them financially or by lording it over them and humiliating them. It also includes secret acts, such as stealing from someone by deceiving them or taking something when they aren’t watching. Without these laws people might cheat other Israelites, and they might even try to cheat the LORD.

READING AND DISCUSSION

Go through this series of laws one at a time, beginning with the one that says, “If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master.” First have someone read the law out loud. (Again this will likely be one paragraph in most Bibles.) Then identify as a group what kind of “cheating” or unfair action is being forbidden. Finally, think of a corresponding example from your own culture that illustrates
how the same principle can be honored today. End with the law that says, “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. . . . Do not forget!”

Note: The law that talks about a man finding something “displeasing” about a woman he marries isn’t referring to whether the new wife is a virgin or not. (That situation was addressed in one of the laws you considered last time.) Rather, this law refers in Hebrew to a “thing of nakedness,” that is, something that would not ordinarily be seen in public, such as a birthmark, skin blemish, or other cosmetic concern. The standards of dress in this society were such that a husband would ordinarily not become aware of these until the wedding night. This law does not give men permission to divorce their wives on these grounds, and it is to be hoped that most Israeliite grooms were loving and honorable and did not. However, in the event that a man did divorce his wife for this reason, this law forbids him to take her back if her next husband also divorces her. Women are not to be passed around between men under the thin cover of technically legal marriages and divorces.

2 Have someone read through to the end of this fourth part of Deuteronomy, beginning after the law about the Amalekites and ending with, “you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised.”

This part of the book ends by telling each Israeliite family to hold a dedication ceremony once it harvests its first crops. This is to celebrate how the LORD’s purposes for the nation he brought out of slavery have been realized by their settlement in the new land. In this culture, when someone’s long-term efforts came to fruition, this was cause for formal celebration and thanksgiving. In fact, as we saw earlier, to make sure that important plans were realized, men were exempt from military service if they hadn’t yet married their fiancées, or if they hadn’t enjoyed the fruit of a vineyard they’d planted, or if they hadn’t begun to live in a house they’d built. (The Hebrew refers literally to men “dedicating” these new houses—another reference to a celebration ceremony.)
What ceremonies in your culture celebrate the culmination of long-term efforts or the realization of important goals? Which ones have you experienced in your own life? The next time you reach even a shorter-term goal, take time out to hold a celebration and thank God for his presence and help.
SESSION 11

MOSES DESCRIBES THE COVENANT RATIFICATION CEREMONY

INTRODUCTION

The treaty form now calls for the partners to proclaim blessings on themselves if they keep their covenant and invoke curses on themselves if they break it. But the LORD isn’t required to do this—there’s no doubt he’ll keep his word! Only the Israelites need to swear oaths to guarantee their compliance. Moses explains here how they are to do this, outlining a ceremony they are to perform in their new land. He then describes the simple blessings the nation will enjoy if it keeps its covenant with the LORD and lists at great length the curses it will experience if it breaks that covenant.

READING

Have someone read the description of how the Israelites are to write out the treaty in plaster on stones.

Then have someone begin reading the description of the ceremony they are to perform. When you get to the part where it says, “The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice,” have group members take turns reading the twelve curses, with everyone saying “Amen” together after each one. (These curses are based on twelve selected laws, one for each of the...
Moses describes the Covenant Ratification Ceremony

twelve tribes, that represent all of the laws in the book. These laws embody its various themes, including giving exclusive loyalty to the Lord, avoiding Canaanite magical practices, maintaining appropriate sexual boundaries, and doing right by others.)

Finally, have group members read a few paragraphs each through the list of blessings and curses, ending with, “These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he made with them at Horeb.” (Warning: The list of curses ends with a grisly description of the horrors of foreign invasion and siege. Have people who are comfortable with difficult subject matter read this part.)

DISCUSSION

Once they reach their new land, the Israelites are to write out this whole treaty in plaster on stones on an elevated location in the center of their territory. Then half the nation is to stand on the slopes of one mountain, and the other half on the facing mountain, as they shout out curses that will echo across the valley between them.

What do you think it would have been like to participate in this ceremony? Would it have helped you remember to keep the covenant with the Lord? What’s the closest thing to it you’ve ever been part of yourself?

The list of blessings is short and general, while the list of curses is long and specific. But this doesn’t mean that the people will be blessed less for keeping the covenant than they would be cursed for breaking it. Rather, it reflects the nature of blessings: They bring such peace and contentment that we often don’t recognize them; they affect life so comprehensively that often they can only be described in general terms. Accordingly, Moses tells the people they will prosper in “everything you put your hand to,” that God will grant them “abundant prosperity” (literally “more than enough goodness”), and so forth.

We may feel as if we are entitled to a certain measure of health and strength, a dependable income, and relative freedom from worries, so that
we see quiet times as just a neutral state in life. Beyond this, we may think we’re in a blessed state if we become rich and famous, and in an accursed state when things go wrong. But the suggestion here is that there are really only two states in life, and that the freedom to enjoy life’s simple pleasures in peace is actually an integral part of the blessed state.

➔ If this is the case, how are you blessed in your life right now?

3 The list of curses begins by predicting national misfortunes such as plague and disease and war. But it then announces a series of “futility curses,” beginning with, “You will be pledged to be married to a woman, but another will take her” and ending with, “Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land.” (Look back over this section of the reading and recognize the many individual futility curses it contains.) As we saw in session 10, the Israelites celebrated when plans were brought to fruition—when a vineyard bore fruit, when a building was completed, when an engaged couple got married. When there was futility instead, when a growth process didn’t reach its natural culmination or if a worthwhile plan was frustrated despite everyone’s best efforts, all was not as it should be.

➔ Question for personal reflection, and for sharing for the group if you wish: Is part of your life “cursed” right now because you’ve worked hard at something but have seen no fruit for your efforts? Pray for discernment about this situation: Should you cut your losses and move on, or is it still possible and reasonable for you to make a renewed effort to see this endeavor through to its culmination? (For example, finishing a degree, completing a long-term project, breaking into a new field, publishing a book, learning a skill or trade, etc.) If God gives you a vision for completing something that’s unfinished at the moment, tell the group about this and ask for their prayers and encouragement.

4 As the biblical story continues, it recounts how the people of Israel experienced the terrors of invasion and siege described here. The Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The
Babylonian Empire conquered the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BC. The prophets God sent to the people explained that all this happened because they broke their covenant with the Lord.

When wars, famines, plagues, and natural disasters happen today, however, we should not conclude that these are direct punishments from God. The people of God on earth are now a multinational community made up of Jesus’ followers all around the world, so that the fortunes of any individual nation no longer reflect God’s direct dealings with them. Nevertheless, national misfortunes may still reflect the consequences of a course that’s contrary to God’s ways, although the people who suffer most from them have often had the least to do with setting this course.

💡 If anyone in the group has been involved in relieving the suffering of people affected by wars, famines, epidemics, or natural disasters, give them the opportunity to share a bit about their experience. Does the list of curses here give some idea of what these people went through? Did your group members feel that they would be doing God’s work by helping these people? How did they determine this, and not decide instead that God was punishing these people and they shouldn’t interfere?
SESSION 12

MOSES LOOKS TO THE FUTURE AND NAMES A SUCCESSOR, WITNESSES, AND CUSTODIANS

Book of Deuteronomy > Part 6: Securing the Treaty

INTRODUCTION

The last part of the standard treaty form provided for each party to make a copy of the agreement and keep it in a secure and honored location—typically in the temple of their national god. Moses will get to this provision shortly, describing how two copies of this treaty (since he’s representing both parties) are to be kept next to the ark of the covenant in the tent of meeting where God’s presence resides. Moses will also prescribe some further measures to safeguard the treaty, including calling on the heavens and the earth as witnesses, naming Joshua as his successor to administer the covenant, and writing a song (which you’ll consider next time) to protect the LORD against the accusation that he has broken the covenant.

But before he does any of this, Moses introduces a new element to the standard form. These treaties typically began with a historical retrospective; now, as this one concludes, Moses offers a future prospective or look ahead, beginning with a summary of the events he reviewed earlier but then looking beyond them into the years ahead. He explains what his prophetic sense reveals to him about what the people will do—how they will break their covenant with the LORD and as a result experience all of the curses he’s just
listed. But Moses also foresees that God will restore the people's relationship with himself not through a renewal of this covenant, but through a new kind of covenant, in which the hearts of the people and their descendants will be transformed so that they will love and serve God spontaneously and gladly. The book of Hebrews, to which we’ll turn starting in session 15, explains how Jesus introduced this new kind of covenant.

**READING AND DISCUSSION**

Take turns reading one paragraph at a time through Moses’ future prospective, beginning where the book says “Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them . . .” and ending with, “For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

Near the beginning of Deuteronomy Moses stressed that the covenant God made at Mount Sinai wasn’t just for the people of the past; his listeners could become part of it in their own day. Now, as he draws his speech to a close, he stresses that the covenant isn’t just for the people of the present, either; it’s for future generations as well. “I am making this covenant, with its oath,” he says, “not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our God but also with those who are not here today.”

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed [in this covenant] belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

If you’re part of a local community of Jesus’ followers, what would you say is its main priority when it comes to designing programs and activities?

- Honoring the traditions and practices of the past.
- Meeting people’s needs in the present.
- Making sure that future generations will have the chance to come to faith.
Think about the wider community of Jesus’ followers in your society. If present trends continue, will it be a vibrant and attractive place of worship and witness two or three generations from now? If not, what needs to change?

If you’re a follower of Jesus and have children (and perhaps grandchildren), have they chosen to follow Jesus themselves, even if they do this in a way different from yours? If not, why do you think they haven’t made this choice yet? In your group prayer time, remember each person’s children and grandchildren, or other young people they’re influencing, asking God to draw them ever closer to himself.

Take turns reading one paragraph at a time through the measures Moses prescribes to safeguard the covenant, beginning with, “Then Moses went out and spoke these words to all Israel” and ending with, “disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and arouse his anger by what your hands have made.”

As you saw in the first reading for this session, at the end of his future prospective Moses called on the heavens and the earth (that is, the sky and the land) to serve as permanent witnesses of this covenant. They would always be present to remind the people of the promises they made to follow God’s ways. Moses will address these witnesses at the beginning of the song you’ll consider next time. Later prophets such as Isaiah would call upon them to testify against the people when they disobeyed God. (The book of Isaiah begins, “Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!”)

In this second reading you’ve now seen Moses create some further safeguards for the covenant. He names Joshua as his successor, God’s continuing representative in this agreement with the people. God promises Joshua, “I myself will be with you.” Moses also ensures that the stone tablets on which the Lord wrote the Ten Commandments will be kept in the nation’s central sanctuary, and that the Levites will read the entire law to the assembled people every seven years.
Witnesses to an agreement don’t just guarantee its legal validity. They also hold the parties accountable and encourage them to keep their commitments. For example, the guests at a wedding are often addressed as witnesses and asked to do all in their power to help the new couple keep their vows. Who are the people who can help hold you accountable to keep the vital commitments in your life?

As Deuteronomy shows, witnesses can be inanimate objects as well as living people. (A wedding ring, for example, functions as a witness in this sense.) What object in your home, office, garden, etc. could you designate as a witness to remind you of an important commitment you’ve made to God?

Who is your successor? That is, is there someone you hope will carry on your work into the next generation? If so, what can you do now to equip and empower them for this role?

Rather than have the Levites circulate around the nation explaining this law to individuals and small groups, Moses has them regularly read all of it aloud to a great assembly. How is our encounter with the Bible different when we engage large chunks of it at a time in community, rather than reading a little bit at a time on our own? (You can draw on the experience you had in session 1, as well as any similar experiences you’ve had, to answer this question.)
As you saw last time, the Lord commanded Moses to write down a song that would be a witness for him against the Israelites. He knew that in the future the people would break their covenant with him and worship other gods, and that as a result they would suffer all of the curses Moses warned them about. When this happened, the Israelites would be tempted to blame God instead of themselves. They would say they were suffering all of these misfortunes because the Lord hadn’t kept his part of the covenant and had abandoned them. So the Lord wants Moses to establish for the record, right from the start, that this isn’t true.

The song Moses writes makes clear that the Lord is “a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” These last two terms were used in Israelite legal proceedings to describe the party who was innocent and in the right. And so this song will be a witness for the Lord not by being present to observe what the people are doing, like the sky and the land, but by testifying for the Lord like someone called upon in court to give evidence about his character and actions.
(At one point in the song, the nation of Israel is called by the name “Jeshurun.” This name comes from the same root as the term translated “upright.” This is to show that the nation is supposed to be upright like God.)

**READING**

Have different people read these parts of the song of Moses, beginning at the places indicated:

- Introductory call to listen: “Listen, you heavens, and I will speak”
- Vindication of God’s character: “I will proclaim the name of the Lord”
- Rebuke of the Israelites for blaming God: “They are corrupt and not his children”
- Recollection of how God chose Israel: “Remember the days of old”
- Description of how Israel abandoned God: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked”
- God’s judgment against Israel: “The Lord saw this and rejected them”
- God’s ultimate decision to forgive and rescue: “The Lord will vindicate his people”

Then have someone read the summary that follows the song, beginning with “Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and spoke all the words of this song” and ending, “By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

**DISCUSSION**

The record of God’s faithfulness to Israel in this song—how he chose them, freed them from slavery, provided for them in the wilderness, and settled them in a new land—is all evidence of his dependable character. It’s proof that he wouldn’t break his part of the covenant and abandon the nation.

** How can you create a record of God’s faithfulness to you over the years so that when difficult times come, you aren’t tempted to think that God has abandoned you? This might involve writing **
songs or poems, creating artwork, scrapbooking, journaling, designating witnesses such as were described in session 12, telling stories to family and friends, sharing your experiences in worship gatherings or in a small group, and so forth. What expressive medium would best help you create a record like this? How will you begin using it in the days ahead?

2 The song of Moses depicts the Lord relating to the people of Israel in a wide range of ways. He cares for them tenderly like an eagle hovering over its young; he angrily unleashes arrows and pestilence to punish them; he has compassion and heals their wounds. God is a dependable covenant partner, but this will put him through all of the experiences a relationship can involve: devotion, betrayal, reconciliation.

Which of these portrayals was the greatest stretch for you—what parts of the song most challenged your usual picture of God’s relationship with us? How could you think more about God acting in the ways that are most difficult for you to imagine—whether in compassion and mercy, anger and judgment, or forgiveness and healing—and so develop a broader picture of the God we are in relationship with?

3 The Lord tells Moses to teach this song to the Israelites and have them sing it. But Deuteronomy only describes Moses reciting the words aloud, never creating any tune. Many interpreters believe that it was up to the Israelites in each subsequent generation to set these words to music in a way that would be meaningful and memorable for them. This made the people of each new generation creative partners in the covenant, in the same way that Moses had a creative partnership with the Lord when he crafted the stone tablets that God wrote on. (We know that later generations took the song to heart because, for one thing, as we’ll see in the second half of this guide, the author of Hebrews quotes or alludes to the song several times.)

What songs or hymns do you know that have been given new tunes in your generation? Has this helped you understand and
appreciate them in new ways? If so, why do you think the new tune had this effect? You may wish to end your time together by singing or listening to some of these songs with new tunes.

4 The song says that Israel (Jeshurun) abandoned God when it became fat, filled with food, heavy and sleek. This is just what Moses warned the people about earlier: He told them in the third part of the treaty, when he was emphasizing exclusive allegiance, “Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God. . . . You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’” Adversity may test our faith, but it gives us a powerful incentive to depend on God. Prosperity can actually be much more dangerous.

♫ How can people who are prosperous and comfortable guard against the dangers of pride and complacency that could lead them to abandon God? For example, are there ways in which they can put themselves in situations where, at least for a time, they are completely dependent on God once again?
HEBREWS
The Customary Order of the Tribes of Israel

Sons of Jacob's first wife Leah, in order of their birth:
- Reuben
- Simeon
- Levi
- Judah
- Issachar
- Zebulun

Sons of Jacob's second wife Rachel, in order of their birth:
- Joseph
- Benjamin

Sons of Jacob's concubine Bilhah:
- Dan
- Naphtali

Sons of Jacob's concubine Zilpah:
- Gad
- Asher

The Order of the Tribes of Israel in the Song of Moses

- Reuben
- (slight mention)
- Judah
- (slight mention)
- Levi
- Joseph
- Benjamin
- Zebulun
- Issachar
- Gad
- Asher
- Dan
- Naphtali

Explanation

- The descendants of Reuben settled on the east side of the Jordan and didn't play a significant role in later national affairs.
- The descendants of Simeon occupied lands within the territory of Judah and were eventually absorbed into that tribe. So Simeon is not mentioned in the song.
- The royal house of David came from Judah and the temple personnel came from Levi, bringing these two tribes to greater prominence.
- The descendants of Joseph formed the centrally located and militarily powerful tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh; the tribe of Benjamin produced the nation's first king. So both of these tribes are placed ahead of Issachar and Zebulun.
- The people of Dan were the first to fall into idolatry; the promotion of Gad ahead of Dan may imply a judgment against them.
INTRODUCTION

The covenant between the LORD and this generation of Israelites has now been proclaimed, ratified, witnessed, and secured. The main business of the book of Deuteronomy has been completed. But there is still one item remaining. God has promised Moses that while he will not be able to enter the new land himself, he will be able to view it from a distance before he dies. And so the book concludes by relating how God summoned Moses to go up Mount Nebo, just across the Jordan from the land of Canaan, to look over the territory the Israelites would soon occupy. Before Moses does this, he pronounces a final blessing on each of the twelve tribes. Then he climbs the mountain, views the land, and dies.

READING

Have someone read how the LORD told Moses to go up Mount Nebo and view the land.
Then have someone read the introduction to the blessing and its opening lines, ending with, “He was king over Jeshurun when the leaders of the people assembled, along with the tribes of Israel.”

Have people take turns reading the blessings on each of the tribes. There’s a short sentence about Reuben, and then each of the other blessings is introduced by a statement like, “About Levi he said . . .”

Have someone read the end of the blessings, beginning with “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun” and ending with “Your enemies will cower before you, and you will tread on their heights.”

Finally, have someone read the conclusion to the book.

**DISCUSSION**

The book of Deuteronomy doesn’t tell us exactly why God forbade Moses to enter the promised land. Moses alludes to this punishment briefly in his historical retrospective, but he doesn’t give any explanation for it. Here we’re told only that it was because of something Moses did at Meribah Kadesh. The book of Numbers earlier in the Bible provides the details of what happened there.

The people had no water in the desert and complained that God had brought them out of Egypt only to make them die of thirst. The Lord told Moses to speak to a nearby rock and command it to pour out water. In this way he wanted to demonstrate both his authority and his compassion for the Israelites, despite their complaining. But Moses was so angry with the people that he shouted at them, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” He then struck the rock with his staff. God still provided water through this means, but Moses had misrepresented his compassionate generosity and suggested that God would work through human anger and power rather than through compelling divine authority. This was such a serious misrepresentation that God corrected it through an equally serious penalty that couldn’t be appealed. Moses would lead the people to the brink of the promised land but die without ever entering it.

At the end of his life Moses experiences the kind of futility curse that Deuteronomy reserves for those who break God’s covenant.
Nevertheless, the book’s conclusion says he was the most powerful man of God the nation would ever know. When leaders of God’s people make serious public mistakes that have lasting consequences, how can they put these behind them and go on to finish their lives and ministries strong? Give illustrations of people you believe have been able to do this. What can we learn from their experiences?

Receiving the dying blessing of a parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent was a cherished experience in ancient Israel. Moses applies this family tradition to the whole nation, speaking a word of blessing to each of the tribes as his final act as God’s representative. In this way, even as he receives his punishment for portraying God wrongly at a crucial moment earlier in life, here at the end of his life he accurately depicts God as fundamentally disposed to bless his people.

Have you ever received a blessing like this from an older relative? If so, tell the group about it. What was the occasion for this blessing? What form did it take? How has it affected you?

If you have children or grandchildren, have you given them your blessing? Let anyone who’s done this share their story with the group. Help others plan a way to offer their blessings as well.

In his blessings, Moses lists the tribes in an unusual order that anticipates later developments in the life of the nation. This is explained by the chart on page XX. While various details are open to interpretation, it’s clear that Moses is blessing the tribes not as they are, but as they will be. It’s as if he’s viewing the future from a distance, just as he will soon see the land from a distance from the top of Mount Nebo, and speaking to the tribes from that perspective.

If someone could write a letter today to the person you would be ten or twenty years from now if you walked closely with God all that time, what would the letter say?
Moses Blesses the Tribes of Israel and Views the Land of Canaan Before He Dies

Now that you’ve read and discussed all the individual parts of Deuteronomy, what are the main impressions you’ll take away from the book? How will it inform what it means for you to be in a covenant relationship with God in your own very different time and place?
OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Numbers in parentheses refer to sessions in this study guide.

First Message (16)
Exposition: Jesus, who announces the new covenant, is greater than the angels who announced the first covenant.
Application: We must remain faithful to the covenant that God announced through Jesus.

Second Message (17)
Exposition: As an apostle, Jesus leads us into a rest that’s greater than the one Moses and Joshua provided.
Application: We must make every effort to enter the rest that Jesus offers us.

Third Message
Exposition: As a high priest, Jesus is greater than the Levitical priests (18-20).
Application: Through the way that Jesus has opened for us, we must draw close to God and hold unswervingly to our hope (21).

Fourth Message
Exposition: The lives of men and women whom God commended provide an illustration of how to live in faith (22).
Application: Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run our own race with perseverance (23).

Conclusion (24)
Practical advice regarding community concerns
EXPERIENCING THE BOOK OF HEBREWS AS A WHOLE

INTRODUCTION

In the centuries after Moses gave the great speech recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel experienced everything he warned them about. They unfortunately broke their covenant with the Lord and worshipped other gods. This made their society unjust and oppressive instead of a model of God’s ways for the rest of the world. The Lord sent prophets to warn the nation over and over again, but the people ignored them and even tried to silence them through threats and violence. Ultimately, after many centuries, God had to enforce all of the curses that were built into his treaty with the Israelites. As you heard at the end of session 11, the Lord allowed them to be conquered by foreign powers and carried away from their land. But he also remembered his promises. He forgave the people and brought them back home in the years that followed. Still, something more was needed.

Toward the end of his speech in Deuteronomy, as you saw in session 12, Moses told the people that God would not just bring them back from exile, he would also make a new kind of covenant with them. He would transform their hearts so that they would love him freely and faithfully. The prophets declared the same thing. Jeremiah, who lived in the sixth century BC, the time when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, spoke these words:
“The days are coming,” declares the **Lord**,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the people of Israel  
and with the people of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their ancestors  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant . . .  
This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time,” declares the **Lord**.  
“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.”

The book of Hebrews, which you’ll begin considering in this session, explains how these promises were fulfilled when God sent his Son Jesus into the world as the mediator of a new covenant. (Mediator means someone who represents each party to the other in an agreement, like Moses.)

The author of Hebrews is unknown. It’s not clear why this author’s name wasn’t attached to the book or, if it ever was, it was later removed. Tradition associates the book with the apostle Paul. Scholars have suggested other possible authors as well, including Apollos, Barnabas, and Priscilla and Aquila. (All of these figures are introduced in the New Testament book of Luke–Acts, where you can read more about them.)

The book of Hebrews was, like Deuteronomy, originally delivered as a public address. It’s made up of four messages that were originally given in gatherings of Jesus’ followers. (At the end the author calls the whole work a “word of exhortation,” the technical term for a sermon or homily in the Jewish synagogue.) These messages were then collected into a book and sent out like a letter. The ending of Hebrews follows the form for letters in this period. (The usual opening of a letter is missing, however, and that’s why the author is unknown today.) This ending provides details that, together with other references in the book, help us identify its recipients.

We can tell that they lived in the Roman Empire, most likely somewhere in Italy (since the author sends them greetings from their friends who have
Come from Italy), perhaps in the city of Rome itself. We know that they lived in the middle of the first century, some time before AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple, because the author says that sacrifices are still being offered there. They were Jews (descendants of the ancient Israelites) who were facing a particular threat. At this time followers of Jesus were beginning to be distinguished from other Jews and singled out for persecution. The believers addressed here were tempted to try to escape by going back to the old covenant and identifying themselves simply as Jews. The author of Hebrews urges them instead to remain faithful to the new covenant, despite the risks and dangers, and show their fellow Jews and people of all other nations how God has brought their rich spiritual heritage to its glorious culmination through Jesus.

Like the Israelites at the edge of the land of Canaan, these believers represented the second generation after a remarkable work of God—the coming of Jesus as the Savior of the world. The decision they made would determine whether the effects of this work would be preserved and transmitted to future generations, or instead die off with the last people who had witnessed it personally.

READING

Have several members of your group who are good at reading out loud, and who enjoy doing so, take turns reading through the book of Hebrews. This should take about half an hour. Switch readers whenever you come to what feels like a natural break. As you’re listening to the book, if you have questions, make a note of these (in the margin of your Bible, in a notebook, etc.). You’ll have an opportunity after the reading to share these questions with the group.

Notice how Hebrews is made up of four separate messages. Each one begins with an exposition of the Scriptures that explains the spiritual meaning behind various aspects of the history and worship of ancient Israel. Each message then applies the exposition to the lives of the listeners, offering a challenge or exhortation based on the teaching that has just been given. In *The Books of the Bible* these messages and their major parts (exposition and
application) are set off by extra white space. You can also see this pattern in the book by following the chart on page XX while you listen.

You’ll notice that, after a brief introductory discussion about angels, the book of Hebrews figuratively situates its audience in exactly the same place where the book of Deuteronomy begins: with the people on the edges of the promised land, hoping to find rest there. Throughout the book you’ll encounter many other things that you’ll recognize from the laws and story in Deuteronomy, including the stone tablets of the covenant, purification through the ashes of a heifer, firstborn who belong to God, tithes that support the Levites, the people’s fear of God’s voice at Mount Sinai, Joshua as Moses’ successor, and so forth. The purpose of the speeches in Hebrews is to show the Jewish listeners how the features of their national heritage find their spiritual fulfillment in Jesus, and so these speeches draw extensively on the details of that heritage. Since it includes not just the history of Israel but its Scriptures as well, Hebrews continually quotes from books found in the First Testament. We’ll explore the character and purpose of these quotations in the sessions ahead.

DISCUSSION

What things struck you most in the book of Hebrews? What insights are you taking away from the book this time that you’ve never gotten from it before? What questions did you write down about what you heard? Mention them now, and then bring them up for discussion in the sessions ahead when you get to the part of the book that prompted them.

What parts of the book helped you understand the kind of persecution its original audience was facing? Describe these parts for the group. Where are communities of Jesus’ followers facing similar persecution today? Let people mention different communities they’re aware of, and remember them during your group’s prayer time.
Imagine yourself in the following situation. You grow up in a modern country where the historic state church has largely become a place of form and ritual. But in some informal meetings in your neighborhood you discover genuine spiritual life among followers of Jesus. You begin attending these meetings regularly and commit your own life to Jesus. But soon there are problems. Your country’s president dissolves the elected parliament and declares himself ruler for life. To consolidate his hold on power, he announces that worship meetings will be permitted only under the auspices of the state church, which he increasingly controls. Participants in unauthorized meetings are punished by arrest, beatings, and the seizure of their property. You were baptized in the state church as an infant and are still considered a member there. You could easily switch to their meetings and avoid any trouble. Several people you know have already done this. What incentives do you have to keep going to the neighborhood meetings instead? On what basis would you decide that this is worth whatever suffering it costs you? How would you answer someone who argued that it didn’t matter which meeting you went to, so long as you were genuinely worshipping God in your heart?
THE COVENANT JESUS ANNOUNCES IS FAR GREATER THAN THE ONE ANNOUNCED BY ANGELS

(Book of Hebrews > First Message)

(This session is longer than others because it provides important background information about the method of the book of Hebrews. You may wish to spend more than one meeting of your group doing this session.)

INTRODUCTION

Each of the four messages in the book of Hebrews presents an exposition (a teaching or instruction) and then draws an application (a challenge or exhortation). In this session you’ll consider the first message. It illustrates the characteristic method that the author employs, so we’ll use it in this session to explain the features of that method. They are as follows:

1. Argument from the Scriptures, referenced through short quotations. The first part of this message—the exposition—seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is greater than the angels. To do this, the author appeals to a number of passages in the First Testament. It’s important to recognize that while the author quotes only brief phrases from each passage, this is done to appeal to the entire context in which they appear. The assumption is that the audience will be familiar with these larger contexts and consider the argument in light of them. This study guide will explain the source and meaning of each of these quotations as you encounter them.
2. Beginning with a quotation from the Psalms. In the expositions the author quotes first from a particular psalm—in this message, Psalm 2—before calling upon other First Testament writings, including further psalms, for support. This may be because the messages in the book were originally based on psalms that were read in worship from a weekly lectionary.

3. Argument from the lesser to the greater. The closing application in this first message is as follows: If anyone abandoned the old covenant, which was spoken through angels, God punished them severely (the history of Israel demonstrates this). So how can anyone expect to escape God’s punishment if they abandon the new covenant, which was, to translate literally, spoken through the Lord (meaning Jesus)—since Jesus is so much greater than the angels? This is the author’s characteristic style of argument: to move from the lesser to the greater. In this case, since the people being addressed respect the sanctions of the old covenant that was delivered through lesser mediators—angels)—they should certainly respect the sanctions of the new covenant that was delivered through a greater mediator—Jesus. (While they might still have to be concerned about what will happen to them if they keep following Jesus, they should be much more concerned about offending God, who sent Jesus into the world as their Savior.)

4. Working within the understanding of a community of interpretation. A key premise of the argument here, which the author doesn’t explain or defend, is that the old covenant was spoken through angels. Where does this understanding come from? It’s actually suggested in the book of Deuteronomy. In the introduction to his blessing of the tribes, Moses describes how God gave the law on Mount Sinai:

The Lord came from Sinai
and dawned over them from Seir;
he shone forth from Mount Paran.
He came with ten thousands of holy ones,
At his right hand angels were with him.

1 Other New Testament books reflect this same understanding. Luke–Acts, for example, records how Stephen said during his trial that the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus had “received the law that was given through angels” but hadn’t obeyed it. Paul writes similarly in his letter to the Galatians that “the law was given through angels.”
This illustration shows how the author of Hebrews (like other New Testament writers), approached the First Testament from the perspective of a community of interpretation that over the centuries had come to share a certain understanding of the story told in the text, beyond what is explicitly stated there. We’ll note more features of this understanding in this and later sessions. The most significant features are the Christological and typological approaches that will be explained below and in session 19.

5. Quoting the Scriptures from a translation. Moses’ words are quoted in point 4 (just above) from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the First Testament that many early followers of Jesus used. The last line, which talks about angels, is probably different in your own Bible. You may have a note explaining that the meaning of this line is uncertain in the original Hebrew. The Septuagint translation expresses one of its possible meanings. The author of Hebrews quotes as a rule from the Septuagint in the expositions in the book, basing arguments on the distinctive wording of that translation. We’ll note this over and over again in the sessions ahead.

You’ll recognize all of these features of the author’s method as you now read and discuss the first message in the book.

READING

Have someone read the first message in Hebrews, beginning at the start of the book and ending with, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Have the other members of the group take turns reading the different Scripture quotations as they come up. (The first reader should pause to let them do this.)

DISCUSSION

The overall argument of the book of Hebrews is that the spiritual meaning of all of the institutions, events, and figures in the Israelite heritage is disclosed in the person of Jesus. This argument will be developed over the whole length of the book. But here at the very beginning, in case the audience hasn’t recognized this about Jesus, the author explains several significant aspects of his powerful identity.
Which of the following statements about Jesus expresses something about him that is new for you, or difficult for you to understand, or different from the way you usually think about him?

- God appointed him heir of all things
- God made the universe through him
- He is the radiance of God’s glory (like the beams of the sun reaching the earth)
- He is the exact representation of God’s being
- He sustains all things by his powerful word
- He provided purification for sins
- He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven

Work together as a group to explain the meaning of any phrases that are unclear. Then let each person share, if they wish, how reflecting on these statements has challenged or changed their understanding of Jesus.

The author of Hebrews then argues that Jesus is greater than the angels because he has been enthroned in heaven, where he sits in a place of exalted authority. The angels, for their part, simply do his bidding. The author quotes seven passages from the First Testament to demonstrate this.

- The first quotation, “You are my Son; today I have become your father,” is from Psalm 2. This psalm was originally written to celebrate the enthronement of a new king in the line of David, the head of Israel’s royal dynasty. Within the community of interpretation in which the New Testament was written, psalms like this were also considered to apply to the future descendant of David who would be God’s chosen deliverer, the Messiah. The author of Hebrews recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. So when, in this psalm, God calls the newly enthroned king his son, the author sees these words as applying to Jesus (in a way that they don’t apply to any angel). This is the essence of the Christological interpretive approach that characterizes this book and much of the rest of the New Testament:
Jesus the Messiah (the Christ) is understood to be the focus of statements in the First Testament that were originally made by, to, or about other figures, because Jesus is the culmination of the story that develops throughout the First Testament.

- The second quotation, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son,” is from the book of Samuel–Kings. It’s a promise that God made to David about his own son and all the subsequent kings in his line. And so it also applies to Jesus as the Messiah and it gives further proof that he is the Son, not just the servant, of God.

- The third quotation, “Let all God’s angels worship him,” comes from the Septuagint translation of Psalm 97. (Once again the wording will probably be different in your Bible.) This psalm describes how the Lord, the God of Israel, reigns over the whole world. Since the author has already established that Jesus is enthroned in heaven with God, this statement is taken as a call for the angels to worship Jesus as well. And if they are worshipping him, he is certainly greater than they are. (The description of Jesus as the “firstborn” comes from Psalm 89, in which God says of David, and by implication of his successors, “I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.”)

- The fourth quotation, “He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire,” comes from Psalm 104. It describes the angels’ role as servants.

- The fifth quotation, which begins, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,” is from Psalm 45. This is a royal wedding psalm that, in the words quoted in Hebrews, describes the enthronement of the Davidic king.

- The sixth quotation, which begins, “In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,” is from Psalm 102. The words are applied to Jesus because he’s already been identified as the one through whom God made the universe. (In the original spoken version of these messages, such connections may have been explained in more detail.)
permanence of Jesus’ reign is contrasted with the insubstantial and transitory fire and wind (the same word as spirit in Greek) that represent angels.

- The seventh quotation, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet,” is from Psalm 110, another enthronement psalm that was understood as Messianic in New Testament times.

The bottom line in this demonstration is that angels are servants while Jesus reigns in royal authority as God’s Son. Jesus is therefore far greater than the angels.

This opening expositional tour-de-force illustrates the rich and complex way in which the author of Hebrews, like the other New Testament writers, relies on the Scriptures as an authoritative source for understanding God’s ways. If you’re part of a community of Jesus’ followers, how is your community’s use of the Scriptures similar to, and different from, each of the following features of the use that’s modeled here?

- Identifying passages by quoting a short selection from them
- Working from a translation that’s widely accepted in the community
- Basing a message (sermon) on a quotation from a psalm, which is then supported by other Scriptures
- Seeing Jesus as the focus and object of statements originally made about others
- Some other aspect you’ve noted

The author says that angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.” Do you believe that you’ve ever been helped by an angel? Or has someone you know told you an angel story? If so, share the experience with the group.

After establishing that Jesus is greater than the angels, the author makes the argument that the covenant introduced by Jesus should be kept even more diligently than the covenant introduced by angels. The author
notes that this is now the second generation since Jesus, but that his words have been “confirmed to us by those who heard him,” and that in this present generation God has also authenticated the message through “signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

In your view, what role do miraculous signs like these have in confirming that Jesus is who his followers claim him to be? What firsthand experience have you had with such signs? Do you wish you could see more of them? Or are they something you try to keep away from? Why, in either case?

In the last part of this message, which begins, “It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come,” the author addresses one more concern. Many of the listeners were likely wondering, “But didn’t God put the angels in charge of the various nations of the world, and so when Jesus came to earth, didn’t he become lower than the angels?” The belief in angelic authority over the nations comes, once again, from the song of Moses in Deuteronomy. Near the beginning of the song it says, in the Septuagint, “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all the human race, he set up boundaries for the people according to the number of the angels of God.” The understanding in later First Testament books such as Daniel is that each nation has its own angelic prince.

The author of Hebrews doesn’t respond to this concern by arguing that while angels may have significant ruling authority over this world, Jesus has even greater authority. Instead, he explains that the salvation Jesus brought has inaugurated a whole new world, in which angels have no authority at all. We’ll hear more about this “world to come” later in the book. Here in the opening message, the concern is with this present world, and so the author does acknowledge that when Jesus came into this world, he indeed became lower than the angels, for a little while.

This is established through a quotation from Psalm 8, beginning, “What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them?” The psalm is describing humans in general, but the author applies it to Jesus because he represents the human race before God. And so when Jesus came down to earth to share in our humanity, he did become “lower than the angels for a little while.”
But this was necessary so that he could represent us effectively before God as our high priest. The third and longest message in the book of Hebrews will explore in detail what it means for Jesus to be our high priest.

The three remaining short quotations further describe this identification between Jesus and humanity. In the first quotation, from Psalm 22, Jesus is understood to be the speaker who calls people his “brothers and sisters,” since this is another Messianic psalm. The next two quotations, “I will put my trust in him” and “Here am I, and the children God has given me,” are from the book of Isaiah. They come at the point where the prophet resolves to commit himself and his family to trusting in God in the face of hostility and an uncertain future. This attitude of trust is the same one Jesus had when he came to earth, and so the people he commits to God with himself are similarly his “children.” Brothers, sisters, children—Jesus relates to all of us as a fellow member of the human family.

The author of Hebrews concludes this message by saying that Jesus was made perfect by what he suffered. Since Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, he didn’t need to be made perfect in any moral sense. But he did need to be perfected for his work as a high priest, and that required sharing the same experiences of suffering as the “brothers,” “sisters,” and “children” he was going to represent. What experiences have you had that have equipped (“perfected”) you to sympathize better with others as you come alongside them in the trials and sorrows of their lives?
**SESSION 17**

JESUS IS THE APOSTLE WHO LEADS US INTO GOD’S REST

Book of Hebrews > Second Message

INTRODUCTION

The core of the book of Hebrews is the demonstration, in its second and third messages, that Jesus is our *apostle* and our *high priest*. As we’ll see in this session, as we consider the second message, the author uses the word *apostle* in its most basic sense, to mean someone who is sent by someone else to represent them on important business. As we’ll see in the following sessions, when we consider the third message, Jesus is our *high priest* because he offers a vital sacrifice to God on our behalf and advocates for us in God’s presence. In these two roles, Jesus serves as the mediator who represents each party to the other in this new covenant.

The two messages that describe how Jesus fulfills these roles are introduced by a statement that announces their themes: “Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, . . . fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our *apostle* and *high priest*.” The second message in the book then explores the implications of Jesus being our *apostle*. 
READING

Have someone read the exposition in the second message in the book of Hebrews, beginning with the statement quoted just above.

Then have someone read the application, beginning with, “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands” and ending with, “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

DISCUSSION

1 In this message the author uses Moses as an example of an apostle. Moses was sent by God on vitally important business: to bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in the land of Canaan. To establish that Moses did his part to fulfill this commission, the author quotes from the book of Numbers, which attests that “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house.” The author describes Jesus as an apostle, too, and asserts that he was likewise “faithful to the one who appointed him.”

ς To what extent are you honoring and fulfilling the responsibilities God has given you? Are you consciously neglecting any of them? If so, how can this change?

2 The author notes that many of the people Moses was sent to deliver failed to enter the promised land, and in the same way many of the people Jesus came to save might similarly miss out on the salvation he offers. To explain how this could happen, the author turns to Psalm 95, which interprets the events of the exodus from a later perspective. In the author’s characteristic style, this psalm provides a foundation for the whole message.

The psalm refers in Hebrew to events that took place at Meribah and Massah. These names are translated “rebellion” and “testing” in the Septuagint, reflecting the actual meaning of the two place names. At Meribah, as you saw in session 14, the people grumbled so bitterly against God about the lack of water that Moses acted toward them in a way that misrepresented God, and so he was forbidden to enter the land of Canaan. At Massah, as you saw in session 5, the people similarly complained about having no water; they
actually accused God of bringing them into the desert to make them die of thirst. These are examples of the kind of obstinacy that ultimately led God to swear, after a final act of defiance at Kadesh Barnea (session 2), that the whole generation that left Egypt would never enter Canaan.

The author of Psalm 95 (according to the Septuagint, this is David, who lived several centuries after Moses) urges his contemporaries not to harden their hearts and turn away from God as these Israelites did in the wilderness. The book of Hebrews, by quoting and interpreting this psalm, calls upon its listeners to hold their original conviction firmly to the very end by maintaining their faith and trust in Jesus.

The Israelites who disobeyed God at Meribah and Massah didn’t necessarily want to stop worshipping him. They just wanted to go back to Egypt, where there was a plentiful supply of water, and worship him from there. But the great work of God in their day—“today” for them—was to bring them out of slavery in Egypt, so there was no going back. Similarly, the people addressed in the book of Hebrews didn’t want to stop worshipping the God of Israel. Some of them just wanted to do this in safety as Jews, rather than in danger as followers of Jesus. But the great work of God in their day—“today” for them—was to reveal a “great salvation” through Jesus, so there was no going back. What is the great work of God in your life and time—“today” for you? What kinds of things make it difficult, dangerous, or daring for you to keep up with this work? How can you exercise your faith in order to keep moving forward boldly with God, rather than thinking you can worship and serve God back at a comfortable place that he actually wants you to leave behind?

The application in this message elaborates on the concept of entering into God’s rest. At Kadesh Barnea, according to the book of Numbers, God actually told the disobedient Israelites that they would never enter the land I swore . . . to make your home. Psalm 95 quotes God as saying instead that these people would never enter his rest. This is because the land became
known as a resting place after Moses called it that in Deuteronomy (near the start of the fourth part of the treaty).

The author of Hebrews notes that this rest, however, must mean more than just settling in the promised land, which happened under the leadership of Joshua, because Psalm 95 calls on its listeners centuries later not to harden their hearts and miss out. So God’s rest must be a transcendent, spiritual, ever-present reality that people in every generation can experience.

To explain this in more detail, the author quotes from the beginning of Genesis, which says that after creating the heavens and the earth, “God rested from all his works.” Since the Bible never says after this that God went back to work on the original creation, the author understands from this silence that God has been “resting from his works” ever since. The people of God can share this very same rest with him.

⇒ The author explains that the essence of entering God’s rest is for a person to “rest from their works, just as God did from his.” This doesn’t mean being idle or lazy, or even taking regular breaks. Rather, it means not striving restlessly to secure your own existence through things like achievement, acquisition, or others’ approval. What would it look like for you to be freed from the drive to obtain these things and to rest instead in God?

⇒ Paradoxically, the author tells us to “make every effort” to enter God’s rest, so that we don’t miss out on it like the Israelites who declined to enter the promised land. How can complacently falling behind God’s plans deny us rest, while diligently following God’s plans grants us rest?

⇒ The author describes the rest he’s talking about as a “Sabbath-rest” because it grows out of God’s rest on the seventh day of creation, after which God set aside the seventh day as the Sabbath or day of rest. Do you observe a regular Sabbath rest in your own life? If so, share some of your practices with the group.
Hebrews invites us to experience not so much a rest that God gives to people (something external to God) as the rest that God himself enjoys (something intrinsic to God’s own experience). What’s it like to think of yourself sharing something like this with God?
THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A HIGH PRIEST—
AND A WORD OF CHALLENGE

INTRODUCTION

The third message in the book of Hebrews is by far the longest, so we’ll consider it over the next several sessions. In this session we’ll start looking at the exposition. In it, the author first begins to explain how Jesus has become our high priest, noting that someone in this position must have two important qualifications:

• First, he must identify and empathize with the people he represents.
• Second, a high priest must be appointed by God to the position.

The author explains how Jesus meets the first qualification, and begins to explain how he also meets the second one, but then abruptly takes a step back to address the listeners directly, challenging them to keep up with the profound truths that are about to be disclosed. Only then does the exposition resume.
READING AND DISCUSSION

Have someone read the beginning of the exposition in this third message, beginning with, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God” and ending, “designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”

The author spoke a little about the first qualification of a high priest—identification and empathy—at the end of the first message in the book of Hebrews, noting that Jesus became like us, fully human in every way (session 16). The author now explains more about how this worked, observing that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin, and repeating that he was made perfect by suffering. (Once again, this was so that he could identify with us completely.)

Then, to show how Jesus meets the second qualification of a high priest—appointment by God—the author reminds the audience that the Messiah has been appointed king in Jerusalem, repeating the quotation from Psalm 2 that began the first message: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” (Recall that this is a royal enthronement psalm. We’ll discover in session 19 how being appointed king in Jerusalem also means being appointed a priest in a certain sense, even though the kingship and priesthood in Israel were carefully separated.) The author then quotes from Psalm 110, another enthronement psalm which also figured in the first message. Psalm 110 will now provide the foundation for this message. This time the author cites the place in this psalm where God appoints the Messiah to be “a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (In this phrase, the word “order” refers to a religious community with a certain task, such as Mother Theresa’s order of nuns, the Missionaries of Charity.)

The author uses a specialized term that appears only here in the New Testament to explain how Jesus is able to “deal gently” with us. The term describes the ability to feel exactly what someone else is feeling without becoming so overwhelmed that you’re not able to help them. It also means not becoming so annoyed at another person’s errors or mistakes that you’re not willing to help them. What’s it like to realize that Jesus is able to relate to you in
both of these ways? How well are you able to relate to others in these ways?

As we noted in session 16, Jesus didn’t need to be made perfect in a moral sense. But he did need to be perfected for his work as high priest by becoming familiar with life on earth. When the author says that he “learned obedience from what he suffered,” this doesn’t mean that Jesus had to learn to obey God through experiencing the consequences of disobedience. Rather, it means that Jesus, who had already chosen to obey, had to learn what obedience involves practically in this life, so he could empathize with and effectively advocate for those who similarly chose to obey, through all of their struggles and sufferings. Where would you say you are on the path to perfection in this sense?

a. Still learning to choose to obey.

b. Learning what obedience, once chosen, involves practically.

c. Inspiring others to obey and supporting them as they do.

2 Have someone read the author’s direct challenge to the audience, beginning with, “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you” and ending, “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

Before developing the exposition any further, the author takes a step back to address the listeners directly. They don’t seem at all ready for the deep truths this explanation will involve. But since there’s no point repeating the rudimentary things they already know—this won’t bring back the members of the community who have already abandoned their initial faith in Jesus—the author resolves to press on and so challenges the listeners to keep up.

If you’re part of a community of Jesus’ followers, choose which of the following statements best describes the approach typically taken in the messages (sermons) that are delivered in your worship gatherings:
a. We’re going to push into the deep stuff; keep up if you can.

b. We’re not going to go too fast, so everybody can keep up.

c. We’re sticking to the basics every time to make sure that everybody at least has the chance to get in the door.

Followers of Jesus have disagreed over the centuries about whether a person who becomes a genuine believer can lose their salvation. You’ll have the opportunity to explore this question under the next discussion point. But whatever we conclude about whether salvation can be lost, the author’s direct challenge to the audience here offers a fascinating description of what salvation involves at its outset. If you’re a follower of Jesus, would you say that the salvation you’ve experienced so far includes each of the following things, as you understand them?

- Being enlightened
- Tasting the heavenly gift
- Sharing in the Holy Spirit
- Tasting the goodness of the word of God
- Tasting the powers of the coming age

If not, which of these things would you like to have a greater experience of? How might this happen? How does your faith community typically describe the normative (to-be-expected) experience of salvation?

Finally, have someone read the continuation of the exposition, beginning with “When God made his promise to Abraham” and ending with, “He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

After challenging the listeners, the author resumes the exposition, developing the idea that when God wants to show the “unchanging nature of his purpose,” he backs his promises with an oath. The author will later draw on this point when discussing how God made the Messiah a priest in the order of Melchizedek by swearing an oath. But on the way there, at this early point in the exposition, the author notes how believers in Jesus are heirs to the promise God swore with an oath to Abraham. This gives them a hope
that is firm and secure, a confidence that they will one day enter into God’s presence, just as Jesus has already done. (This presence is represented in the Jewish heritage by the “inner sanctuary behind the curtain”—more about this in session 20.)

As noted above, followers of Jesus disagree about whether a person can lose their salvation. Both sides in the debate appeal to the Scriptures, often to passages in the same book. The readings for this session provide a good example. The second reading, in which the author challenges the listeners directly, is one of the passages frequently cited by those who argue that salvation, once obtained, can later be lost. But this third reading, which talks about the firm and secure hope that believers have of entering God’s presence, seems to support the opposite view. Do you have an opinion on this question? If so, on what overall basis have you reached it? How is it supported or challenged by these two passages? Group members should share their views respectfully and briefly.
INTRODUCTION

In this third message in the book of Hebrews, the author is explaining how Jesus has become our high priest. As the exposition continues, this message now demonstrates that as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus has a vastly superior ministry to that of the Levitical priests. It’s so superior, in fact, that the new covenant Jesus mediates must supersede the first covenant that depended on the work of those priests.

READING

Have group members take turns reading a paragraph at a time through more of the exposition in this third message, beginning where you left off last time and ending with, “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.”
DISCUSSION

This message is based primarily on Psalm 110, but in it the author characteristically draws on other Scriptures for support, in this case the story in Genesis that describes who Melchizedek was. The author first translates the word Melchizedek, explaining that it means “King of Righteousness.” Melchizedek was most likely not a given name, but an honorary title of the Jebusite kings who formerly ruled in Jerusalem, including the one in the Genesis story who greeted Abraham. (A similar example of an honorary title is the name Pharaoh that was given to all the rulers of Egypt.) After the Israelites conquered Jerusalem, their own kings took over the title Melchizedek. Since the Jebusite kings had been priests, the Israelite kings also assumed an honorary role as priests and interceded for the nation in prayer. But they were not allowed to offer sacrifices; this was reserved for the descendants of Aaron under the law of Moses.

The author next explains that King of Salem (that is, of Jerusalem) means “King of Peace.” By translating these two terms, the author identifies Jesus, who is a priest in the order of Melchizedek by virtue of being the Messianic king of Jerusalem, as someone who helps people become righteous before God and so find peace with God.

Would you say that you’ve found peace with God by becoming righteous through the work of Jesus? If so, explain to the group how this has happened.

Now come some more significant details—or rather, a significant lack of them. The Hebrew Scriptures usually introduce a new figure into their narratives by describing the person’s parentage and ancestry. They usually also report when a figure dies. But the book of Genesis doesn’t do either of these things in the case of Melchizedek. This allows the author of Hebrews to observe that, when considered only in light of what the Scriptures say about him, Melchizedek seems to have no origin or ending. He appears to “remain a priest forever.” In this way he “resembles the Son of God,” and this allows him to serve as an earthly representation of the Messiah. This is why the Lord chose to name him as the head of the order of priests to which the Messiah (represented in Psalm 110 by the Davidic king) would belong.
This is a classic example of the author’s typological method, which is based on the understanding that transcendent spiritual realities are reflected in earthly replicas. A little later in this message the author makes the basis of this method explicit, noting how the earthly tabernacle had to be modeled after the heavenly pattern Moses was shown. The Greek word is typos, the source of the English word type, and so this interpretive method is known as typology.

If spiritual realities are represented in earthly replicas or types, do you think there’s a “true you” in the mind of God that you can increasingly approximate on this earth as you grow more and more into God’s purposes for your life? If you could catch a glimpse of the “true you,” what would this person be like? In your personal prayer times, ask God to help you see yourself as he sees you.

The author then demonstrates how, as a priest in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is superior to the Levitical priests in the order of Aaron:

- Jesus is greater because a superior blesses an inferior. Melchizedek was shown to be superior to Abraham when he blessed him and his future descendants within him, including Levi.
- Jesus is greater because his priesthood is enduring while the Levitical priesthood is fading away. The author observes that if Jesus can be a priest, even though he’s descended from Judah, the priesthood must no longer be limited to descendants of Levi. And if this former regulation has been set aside, it must be because it was weak and ineffective.
- Jesus is greater because, unlike the Levitical priests, he was made a priest through a divine oath, which demonstrated God’s unchangeable purposes toward him.
- Jesus is greater because he is a single priest who stays in office perpetually, unlike the series of Levitical high priests who kept dying and being replaced.
- Jesus is greater because he was able to make a once-for-all sacrifice on behalf of the people. The Levitical priests, by contrast, had to offer sacrifices continually first on behalf
of their own sins and then for the people. But Jesus is holy, blameless, and pure, so he never needed to offer sacrifices for any sins of his own.

Have you ever had a priest, pastor, relative, or friend who was an empathetic and effective intercessor for you, representing your needs and concerns before God? If so, what qualities made this person so good at this? If this person no longer has this role in your life, what changed? If you have lost this intercessor, reflect in light of that experience on what it means that Jesus “always lives to intercede” for us. Share your thoughts on this with the group.

The author concludes this part of the exposition with a characteristic argument from the lesser to the greater. The ministry of a priest is the lesser thing; the covenant served by that ministry is the greater thing. So if the ministry of Jesus is superior, then the new covenant he serves must also be superior. It is, in fact, so superior that it makes the first covenant obsolete. There must have been something wrong with the first covenant if it needed to be replaced. The author explains what this was by quoting the prophecy of Jeremiah that we noted in session 15. The improvements under the new covenant will be:

• God will internalize his laws in his people’s hearts and minds, so that they will be inherently disposed to follow them, not imperfectly constrained from the outside.
• People will have an experiential, relational knowledge of God—they won’t just know about God.
• Jeremiah said that all of this would come about when God dealt definitively with the wickedness and sins that had broken the people’s relationship with him. God did this through the once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus offered. The author will consider this sacrifice in the remainder of this exposition, which we’ll consider next time.

Which of the following aspects of the new covenant have you definitely experienced? Which ones would you like to come into a greater experience of?
a. Being inherently disposed to follow God’s ways.

b. Knowing God instead of just knowing about God.

c. No longer feeling guilty before God because you know your sins have been definitively forgiven.

Ask those in the group who feel they’ve experienced one or more of these aspects of the new covenant to share how these things became a reality for them.
INTRODUCTION

Having explained how Jesus is our high priest in the superior order of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews now describes how, in this capacity, he was able to offer a once-for-all sacrifice on our behalf. To conclude the exposition in this third message in the book, the author explains the meaning and effect of Jesus’ death on the cross by comparing it with the ceremony that was performed under the first covenant once a year to seek God’s forgiveness for the people’s sins. The audience has apparently never seen the Jerusalem temple. So the author, drawing on the biblical books of Exodus and Leviticus, describes the arrangements of this earthly sanctuary and explains how the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, bringing the blood of sacrifices on behalf of the people.

But even though this act took place in the most sacred space on earth, on the holiest day of the year, it could not provide a definitive remedy for sin. The mediator was ineffective, and the offering was insufficient. The high priest could not intercede effectively for the people because he always had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins first. And “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins”—this blood, like all of the other
means and measures prescribed in the law, is “only a shadow of the good things that are coming.”

But Jesus himself was “unblemished,” and he offered his own precious blood “through the eternal Spirit,” so that when he sacrificed his body on the cross, “he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle.” That is, he entered the Most Holy Place in the true heavenly sanctuary, and there he offered a once-for-all sacrifice for us. In a classic argument from the lesser to the greater, the author insists that if the blood of bulls and goats could make people outwardly clean, then the blood of Christ certainly has the power to cleanse and transform us both inside and out.

READING

Read through to the end of this exposition, once again taking turns reading a paragraph at a time. Begin where you left off in the last session and end with, “where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.”

DISCUSSION

Choose a sacrament or religious observance that’s especially meaningful to you and explain how it represents a transcendent spiritual reality through its form or pattern.

Where are the sacred spaces in your world? That is, in what places or kinds of places do you encounter God most directly and meaningfully? How are these places, even though they are just “shadows,” able to provide an entrance for you into God’s presence?
What are the sacred times in your life? That is, at what times of the day, week, month, or year are you best able to experience or relive God’s work in the world and in your own life? Why do these times function in this way for you?

In drawing the analogy between the death of Christ and the Day of Atonement, in addition to contrasting transcendent spiritual realities with their earthly reflections, the author also continues to contrast the present age with the coming age. Here we get a more detailed explanation of how these ages relate to one another.

In one sense we are living in “the present time” and the coming age is still future; the law, for example, is a shadow of “the good things that are coming.” But in another sense the coming age has already arrived: Christ is the high priest of the “good things that are now already here.” The two eras, in other words, actually overlap. The coming age begins with the appearance of Jesus, which is described here as the “culmination of the ages.” It is the “time of the new order,” when measures are introduced that even now involve heavenly realities and address the inner being.

The present age will ultimately give way to the coming age. Near the end of this exposition the author echoes the words of Psalm 110, its foundational text, to assert that Christ, seated at the right hand of God, now waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. This will happen when God establishes “a kingdom that cannot be shaken”—something the author will describe in the final message of the book.

In session 18 you were asked whether you had “tasted the powers of the coming age.” Now that the concept of the coming age has been explained in more detail, do you feel that you understand it better? To what extent do you recognize the realities of this “new order” in your life, including:

- the assurance of God’s definitive forgiveness?
- a heart and mind that are disposed to obey God and are surrendered to his will?
After completing the analogy between the death of Christ and the Day of Atonement, the author of Hebrews uses a will, which only comes into effect upon the death of the person who makes it, to explain how a death is also required for a covenant to take effect. (The same Greek word means both *will* and *covenant.* The difference is, in a will the person is saying, “This is what you will receive *upon* my death,” while in the new covenant Jesus is saying, “This is what you will receive *by virtue of* my death.”

What do you think it was like for Jesus to know that he had something wonderful to give to innumerable people, but that he would have to die to do this? Have you accepted Jesus’ sacrificial death on your behalf?

The author concludes this lengthy exposition with a word of reassurance. The recurring sacrifices under the first covenant were a constant reminder of sin and guilt, but under the new covenant there have been no more sacrifices since the one Jesus offered. This gives us the assurance that we’ve been cleansed and forgiven once for all.

To establish that the former recurring sacrifices have now been displaced by the single sacrifice of Christ’s body, the author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 40: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me. . . . I have come to do your will.” This is another of the book’s Christological interpretations, in which statements from the First Testament that were originally made by, to, or about other figures are attributed to Christ. Psalm 40, according to its traditional heading, was written by David. But since Israel’s king represented the Messiah typologically, the author recognizes Jesus’ own willingness to do God’s will reflected in these words.

God’s will for Jesus was that he sacrifice his own body.1 The author explains that this act put an end to the need for recurring sacrifices for “sins and lawless acts.” Through what Jesus did, in the words of Jeremiah once again,

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1The phrase “a body you have prepared for me” comes from the Septuagint, which once again presents one possible rendering of a difficult Hebrew phrase. In Psalm
God put his laws in the hearts of his people and wrote them on their minds. Under the new covenant God transforms his people’s hearts so that they love him freely and faithfully, and they no longer incur the guilt and shame of sin.

Do you have the assurance that because of what Jesus has done for you, there’s nothing more that you or anyone else ever needs to do for you to be forgiven and welcomed by God? If you still feel guilty even though you do understand what Christ has done for you, what do you think causes this feeling?

40 your own Bible may say something like, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened.”
INTRODUCTION

The author now applies the truths of the long exposition in the book’s third message to the situation of the audience. The death of Jesus is the only sacrifice for sin that’s ever needed. But it’s also the only one that is effective. So the listeners must not renounce what Jesus has done for them. They must not think that they can go back to their former Jewish identity and find safety there if they cease to be followers of Jesus. If they renounce him, “no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment.” Nevertheless, after warning the audience in this way, the author expresses renewed confidence that their faith is genuine and that they will persevere.

The author begins this application by observing that we can confidently enter the Most Holy Place—meaning the very presence of God—because Jesus, through the sacrifice of his body, has opened a new and living way for us. (Living here means lasting, enduring.) Jesus himself is our great priest in the heavenly temple. In light of these truths, we should do three things:

• “Let us draw near to God”
• “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess”
• “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”
The author introduces all three of these imperatives in the first section of the application and explores them one by one in more detail in the three sections themselves.

READING

Have three people read the application in the third message of the book of Hebrews, beginning at the following places:

- “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place . . .”
- “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth . . .”
- “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light” (ending with, “We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved”).

DISCUSSION

In the first section of this application, the author explains that we should draw near to God on the basis of:

- A sincere heart. This means coming to God out of simple affection and devotion, without any mixed motives.
- The full assurance that faith brings. This is another way of describing the confidence we have to enter God’s presence.
- Having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. In light of the discussion of sprinkling in the exposition, this may refer to becoming part of the new covenant that was sealed by the death of Christ.
- Having our bodies washed with pure water. This is likely a reference to baptism, the outward ceremony that reflects inward cleansing by Christ’s sacrifice. (If you haven’t yet been baptized but think you might like to be, tell the group so they can help answer any questions you have about this and arrange an occasion for you to be baptized.)
Which of these four realities would you most like to experience to a greater degree? Why?

How eager are you to draw near to God? What, if anything, hinders your eagerness? (For example, are you afraid that God might find fault with you? If you became confident that he wouldn’t, would this help you be more eager to draw near to him? Can what you’ve been learning from the book of Hebrews help give you this confidence?)

In the second section of this application the author addresses the situation of those who renounce their faith in Christ—those who don’t hold unswervingly to their hope and who give up meeting with other believers. This is what is meant by the phrase “if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth.” This phrase doesn’t refer to people who continue to struggle with sin even after they become followers of Jesus. The author has already said that Jesus understands all about temptation and sin and is able to “empathize with our weaknesses.” Rather, the reference here is to people who continue in sins that they know cannot be forgiven because, though they fully understand the unique sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf, they choose to stop following Jesus in order to avoid persecution. Such people, the author says, trample the Son of God underfoot, treat the blood of the covenant as if it were unholy, and insult the Spirit of grace. The author quotes two lines from the song of Moses in Deuteronomy, evoking all of the curses described in that book, to depict their fate: “It is mine to avenge, I will repay”; “The Lord will judge his people.”

Followers of Jesus have different understandings about what happens to people who never really get the chance in this life to find out what Jesus has done for them. But the people in view here know exactly what Jesus has done for them and they still turn away from him. They create a break in their relationship with God that they know can never be mended. If hell is essentially exclusion from God’s presence, was hell made for people like this?
The author has repeatedly stressed that earthly entities are only reflections of spiritual realities, and that the present age will inevitably give way to the coming age. How would maintaining this perspective help a person hold unswervingly to their hope in Jesus and not abandon him in order to escape persecution in this world?

In the third section of this application the author gives several examples to show how the listeners can spur one another on to love and good deeds: standing side by side with those who are insulted and persecuted, visiting those who are imprisoned, not clinging to possessions, etc. They did all these things in an earlier time of persecution, and the author recalls their perseverance then to encourage them now that “we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.” With a closing quotation from the prophet Habakkuk (once again from the Septuagint version), the author reminds the audience that Jesus will return soon and reward those who remain steadfast in their faith.

What person has set the best example for you of “love and good deeds”? How has this person’s example inspired your own actions?

What followers of Jesus do you know, either personally or from reading biographies, etc., who have not capitulated even though they suffered the kinds of things described here: imprisonment, false accusations, public insults, confiscation of property, and so forth? How does their example challenge you?

What’s the greatest challenge to your faith that you’ve been able to meet in the past without “shrinking back”? How can this experience encourage you as you face challenges in the present?
INTRODUCTION

In the first three messages in the book of Hebrews, the author has explained who Jesus is and what he has done for us. In the final message the author now explains how—that is, by what vital means—we must respond to Jesus.

There have already been hints of this earlier in the book. In the second message the author says that we will belong to Christ “if we hold our original conviction firmly to the end” and don’t fail through unbelief. In the exhortation in the third message the author challenges the audience to “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” And as we saw in the last session, the third message concludes with a quotation from Habakkuk that says, “My righteous one will live by faith.” Now in this fourth message the author defines and illustrates what faith is.

This is the definition: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” The Greek word that’s translated confidence here is the same one that’s translated conviction in the quotation above from the second message. But it’s also the same word that’s used at the beginning of the book to describe Jesus as the exact representation of God’s being. We see
that the word can refer to the substance of a thing as well as to a conviction about a thing. Both of these senses are implied in this definition of faith. It’s being so sure of something that you live and act as if it were really there—which it is, although it’s not evident to everyone. Faith is exercised specifically in regard to the unseen realities of the spiritual world that lie behind the visible realities of the physical world. (What we see was made out of what is not visible—this is another insight that faith grants, according to this message.)

But almost all of the exposition in this fourth message consists of illustrations. Living by faith—that is, living in the light of unseen spiritual realities—is the means by which we please God and receive what he has promised. Because this is such a practical endeavor, the author describes at length how various men and women whose lives are recorded in the First Testament received God’s approval for their faith.

READING

Read together through the exposition in this fourth message. Have group members take turn reading each of the paragraphs that begin with the words “by faith.” Have one person serve as the narrator and read the opening of the exposition as well any other paragraphs that start with different words, including the closing, which begins, “And what more shall I say?” and ends, “God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

DISCUSSION

The author provides evidence that each person listed in this exposition truly lived by faith. In the case of the first two figures, Abel and Enoch, the evidence of their faith is that the Scriptures say they pleased God, since “without faith it is impossible to please God.” But the faith of the remaining people is demonstrated through evidence that they lived in light of unseen spiritual realities rather than visible earthly ones. They believed that God would keep his promises and they lived in a way that showed they were counting on this.
Working together as a group, go back through the exposition, from Noah through to Rahab, and describe what practical actions each person performed that demonstrated their faith. Note:

- The author assumes a certain familiarity with these stories. Reconstruct them for yourselves from what various group members can remember from their own reading of the Scriptures.
- In some cases a person’s faith is revealed through subtle details. For example, why is it significant that Jacob was leaning on a staff or walking stick?
- In some cases it’s necessary to reword statements in order to identify the actual agent who exercises faith. For example, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days” means that “By faith the army of Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and its walls fell down.”

Have you ever had an experience when, in a practical way, you lived in light of unseen spiritual realities, even though earthly considerations dictated a different course of action? Or have you ever taken concrete steps in response to something you had confidence God was going to do in your life, before it became evident that this would actually happen? If so, share your experiences with the group.

Some of the examples here show that when one agent exercises faith, this faith influences other people and things, to such an extent that it’s almost as if these people and things are exercising faith themselves. The text says literally, for example, “By faith Moses was hidden.” And, as we’ve noted, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell.” How has the faith of others contributed to your own faith? How has your faith influenced the people and things around you?
The author says, when commenting on the faith of Enoch, that no one comes to God (that is, no one chooses to follow God) unless they believe that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Moses forsook the treasures of Egypt and accepted mistreatment along with the people of God because he was “looking ahead to his reward.” At the end of the third message, the author urges the audience, “Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.” Do you believe that God rewards those who earnestly seek him? If so, how does God do this?
INTRODUCTION

The author of Hebrews now draws a straightforward practical application to conclude this fourth message. The men and women of faith who were considered in the exposition constitute a “great cloud of witnesses.” This means that they are witnesses to us of the value of having faith like theirs, and they are also witnesses of our own actions. Within the extended athletic metaphor that the author develops at the beginning of this application, they are like the crowd in the grandstands cheering us on—a crowd made up of decorated veteran athletes who are eager to see us achieve great triumphs as they have. As the application develops, the author describes the specific ways in which we can “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” by welcoming discipline, eluding the obstacles that most commonly trip up people of faith, and so ultimately reaching the glorious destination that awaits us.

💭 Do you have friends or relatives who have finished their life in faith and who are now cheering you on from the grandstands? If so, share their names.
READING AND DISCUSSION

Have someone read the first part of this application, beginning with “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” and ending with “‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”

At the end of the third message the author told the listeners that they needed to persevere in order to receive what God had promised. The same point is made repeatedly here: we must run with perseverance; we must look to the example of Jesus, who endured the cross and endured opposition from sinners; we must endure hardship ourselves. (The same Greek word is used in each case.) To illustrate what this perseverance involves, the author offers a series of athletic metaphors. The Christian life is like a race (described by the general term for an athletic contest); believers must struggle against sin (echoing this term); they must throw off excess weight (NIV “everything that hinders”); they must strengthen their limbs and joints.

The image of an athletic contest leads naturally into a consideration of the kind of personal discipline that athletes must have. The author, quoting from the book of Proverbs, encourages the listeners to see the hardships they’re experiencing—the opposition and persecution—as a discipline that God is introducing into their lives the way a loving father would discipline a son or daughter. It may be painful at first, but ultimately it will enable them to share in God’s holiness. This idea recalls the places earlier in the book that say that Jesus himself was made perfect through suffering.

Have you ever gone into training for a sport or an athletic event, or to get into better shape? Was it painful at the start? Did the training have good effects in the end? Share your story with the group.

What disciplines can you build into your life to strengthen your faith so that it can endure difficulties and not collapse under pressure?

In a characteristic argument from the lesser to the greater, the author says, “We have all had human fathers who disciplined
us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!” In what ways, or on what occasions, do you feel that your own father provided a good example of God’s loving and productive discipline in your life? In what ways have you had to correct the picture provided by your father in order to understand God’s fatherly discipline more accurately?

How can persecution by other people be experienced as loving discipline from God that will produce a “harvest of righteousness and peace” in our lives?

Have someone read the next part of this application, beginning with “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone” and ending with “Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.”

The author now gives some specific practical advice about the kinds of things that are most likely to keep a person from finishing the race well. These are the sins that “so easily entangle,” tripping up many a well-intentioned runner. They include:

- Not making it a priority to maintain good relationships with other people.
- Not taking holiness seriously; excusing small infractions as insignificant.
- Falling short of the grace of God—not following God as far as he wants to take you. (The same expression is used earlier in the book: “Since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”)
- Allowing a poisonous plant (NIV “bitter root”) to send out shoots that could harm many people. This is an allusion to Deuteronomy, where Moses told the people, as he was securing their treaty with the LORD, “Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those...
nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.” Here in Hebrews the image likely depicts some believers turning away from faith in Jesus and leading others away with them.

- Being sexually immoral.
- Being godless or profane. This means not valuing high, noble, and spiritual things above cheap and common things. The story of Esau from the book of Genesis provides an example of this: He sold his birthright for a single meal.

Where have you seen sins like these keep people from finishing their lives well as followers of Jesus? Using discretion when telling these people’s stories, describe their experiences to the group in a way that can help them benefit from the practical cautions the author of Hebrews offers here.

Have someone read the rest of this application, through to where it says, “Our God is a consuming fire.”

This application, and the series of messages in the book, concludes with one last argument from the lesser to the greater. The author draws a contrast between the earthly Mount Sinai, where God made the first covenant with Moses, and the spiritual Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, where Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. To encourage the recipients to remain faithful to Jesus, the author then asks, “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?”

Mount Sinai, shrouded in dark clouds and burning with fire, was a terrifying sight. As you saw in session 3, the people were so afraid there that they didn’t want to hear God speaking anymore and asked Moses to represent God to them. (As the author says here, they “begged that no further word be spoken to them.”) The heavenly Mount Zion, by contrast, is depicted in images that show that it is a joyful, gracious, and attractive place. Nevertheless, its welcome is not to be spurned. The author makes this clear with one more quotation from Deuteronomy, evoking what Moses told the
people when he was recalling the experience at Mount Sinai himself: “Our God is a consuming fire.”

♫ The author said earlier that people of faith like Abraham were “looking forward to the city . . . whose architect and builder is God.” The author now describes what will be found in this city. Work together as a group to explain what the presence of each of the following indicates about what life will be like there:

• Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly
• The church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven
• God, the Judge of all
• The spirits of the righteous made perfect
• Jesus the mediator of a new covenant
• The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Note: Abel, who’s mentioned earlier among the heroes of the faith, was murdered by his jealous brother Cain; God then told Cain that his brother’s blood was crying out for vengeance from the ground.)

♫ What are you looking forward to most in the heavenly city?
INTRODUCTION

We noted in session 15 that while the book of Hebrews doesn’t begin like a letter, it does end like one. At this time people would cover personal matters at the end of their letters, after treating whatever business had first prompted them to write. And so, having presented the four messages that explain why followers of Jesus must remain loyal to him despite persecution, the author now addresses some practical concerns relating to life in the community that is receiving these messages. This section of the letter makes clear that the author has been one of their teachers at some point and is still in touch with them and aware of developments within their community.

READING

Have someone read the conclusion to the book of Hebrews, beginning where you left off last time and reading through to the end of the letter.

DISCUSSION

The author begins by encouraging the community to cultivate virtues that will enable them to live out their faith in Jesus in a way that pleases
and honors God. In the application at the end of the fourth message, the author gave similar instructions to individuals, to help them finish the race well. (“See that no one . . .”) But now the focus is on the qualities that the community as a whole should develop.

Compare the ideals for community life that are described here with the values that generally prevail in your society and culture. Rank the following from 1 to 5, with 1 being the value your society lives out the best, and 5 being the one it currently shares the least.

- People showing genuine love for one another, as if they were brothers and sisters.
- Taking care of strangers (for example, by welcoming refugees).
- Helping those in trouble and in need, identifying with their situations.
- Honoring marriage and avoiding adultery and sexual immorality.
- People not loving money and being content with what they have.

In what specific ways can your community of Jesus’ followers provide a positive example of these virtues to the surrounding culture, particularly of the ones the culture doesn’t seem to value?

In order to encourage the recipients to keep their lives free from the love of money and to be content with what they have, the author quotes the words that God spoke to Joshua when he succeeded Moses as Israel’s leader: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (As you saw in Deuteronomy, Moses promised Joshua similarly, “The LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”) A person might love money, and be discontent with what they had, if they saw money as a source of security and validation. Knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us enables us to recognize him instead as our security, so that we can be content in whatever situation God calls us to,
whether we have money or not. What personal encouragement does this offer you in this season of your life?

We learn here that some people were introducing “strange teachings” into the community, including the idea that believers would benefit spiritually by eating certain foods, which apparently had been dedicated to God in some ceremonial way. Whether the people teaching these things came from the outside or arose from within the community, they were clearly rivals to the established leadership, since the author surrounds his rebuttal of their teachings with twin admonitions to the listeners to remember, imitate, respect, and obey their original leaders. It’s possible that these rivals were even trying to discredit the teachings, integrity, and authority of the author, who has to insist, “We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.”

The author specifically refutes the strange teachings by explaining that believers are strengthened by God’s grace, not by eating particular foods. Beyond this, followers of Jesus have an exclusive altar (no doubt meaning the one in the heavenly sanctuary), so they shouldn’t worry about the benefits anyone claims an earthly altar can convey through the food that’s dedicated on it. Besides, since Jesus died on the cross outside Jerusalem, the place of effective sacrifice is now “outside the camp.” It’s not within the city (specifically in the temple and its sacrificial system). As the fourth message has already made clear, we have no enduring city here, but are looking for the one that is to come. Beyond all this, a steadfast and open profession of loyalty is the real sacrifice that God is interested in.

What “strange teachings” are circulating among followers of Jesus in your culture? How do you think the author of Hebrews would refute them? (What truths have been conveyed in the four messages in this book that would expose these “strange teachings” as false?)

The author of Hebrews encourages the recipients to remember their leaders, consider the outcome of their lives, and imitate their faith. This is similar to the earlier appeal to “imitate those
who through faith and patience inherit what is promised,” except that in this case the recipients are to imitate not the heroes of the faith whose stories are told in the First Testament, but people they have known personally. What people have you known whose faith has brought their lives to an exemplary outcome? What habits, attitudes, perspectives, or commitments of theirs are worth imitating?

After wishing a beautiful and eloquent blessing on the listeners, the author concludes by sharing some brief news and greetings. These give us tantalizing hints about where the recipients lived and how they were connected to the wider community of Jesus’ followers in the first-century Roman Empire.

By conveying the greetings of “those from Italy,” the author suggests that the recipients themselves live in Italy and will be glad to hear from their friends traveling elsewhere in the empire. The author also says that “our brother Timothy has been released.” Most interpreters agree that this is the same Timothy who accompanied and helped the apostle Paul in his work. The language suggests that the author is similarly one of Paul’s coworkers—perhaps Barnabas, Apollos, or Priscilla, as various scholars have suggested. In letters of this time it was customary for writers to say when they might see the recipients again. Intriguingly, this author promises to come with Timothy to visit them “if he arrives soon.” This has led some to speculate that the author was writing from somewhere between Italy, where the recipients lived, and the place of Timothy’s imprisonment. If this was Asia Minor, as is probable, then the author may have been in southern Greece, where Paul’s coworkers remained active.

Considering such possibilities enables us to situate the letter, at least provisionally, a little better in space and time. As the author has insisted all along, the work of God in this present age takes place in physical settings that reflect transcendent spiritual realities, and for that reason these settings are worth identifying and describing. Nevertheless, for the most part, the circumstances that occasioned this anonymous letter remain uncertain. And perhaps this is as it should be, since the author also insists, even more fer-vently, that someday the transcendent realities of the coming age will break in and displace their shadows and images in this age. Then (as a quotation
from the prophet Haggai explains at the end of the fourth message) created things will be removed so that what cannot be shaken will remain. God will establish the eternal covenant through Jesus Christ, and he will receive glory forever and ever.

✦ Now that you’ve read and discussed the whole book of Hebrews, what are some of your favorite images from the book? What statements within the book sum up its overall message for you? What’s the main thing you’ll take away from it?

✦ Do you now understand yourself to be part of a new covenant, which will one day be established universally as an eternal covenant? If so, how will you “hold your conviction firmly to the very end” so that future generations can become a part of it too?

✦ Conclude your time by reading the author’s whole blessing out loud all together, beginning with, “Now may the God of peace . . .” and ending, “through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

- chapter and verse numbers removed
  (chapter and verse range given at bottom of page)
- natural literary breaks
- no additives: notes, cross-references, and section headings removed
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