

## **PART THREE 5:11 - 10:39**

**The priesthood of Christ is superior  
to the Levitical priesthood**

## Our perfect high priest

We come now to the central Part of the oration in which the author presents Christ as the one who attained human perfection in the goal of eternal communion with God. Furthermore, as the perfect mediator, he and he alone is the one who can bring us to the same perfection by leading us to the same goal. Our author touched on this idea earlier when he wrote: ‘It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation *perfect* through sufferings’(2:10). He comes back to it again and again in this section of his oration, as the following listing demonstrates:

Having been made *perfect*, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

– Hebrews 5:9-10

Solid food is for the mature [*perfect*], for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

– Hebrews 5:14

Let us go on toward *perfection*, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation.

– Hebrews 6:1

If *perfection* had been attainable through the levitical priesthood — for the people received the law under this priesthood — what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?

– Hebrews 7:1

The law made nothing *perfect*; there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.

– Hebrews 7:19

The law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made *perfect* forever.

– Hebrews 7:28

Gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot *perfect* the conscience of the worshipper.

– Hebrews 9:9

Through the greater and *perfect* tent, Christ entered once for all into the Holy Place.

– Hebrews 9:11-12

The law can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make *perfect* those who approach.

– Hebrews 10:1

By a single offering Christ has *perfected* for all time those who are sanctified.

– Hebrews 10:14

The author prefaces the central section of his teaching with a lengthy appeal (5:11 - 6:20). He begins by alerting his audience to the fact that this will not be a brief treatment. It will need all their attention, and he is not confident that they will understand, because they have become slack in 'hearing' (Greek: akoē). We recall his earlier statement: 'we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it' (2:1). In introducing this section, he spoke of Jesus becoming 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (5:9). In commenting on that statement, we noted the connection between 'obeying' (hupakoē) and 'hearing' (akoē). This connection is of special significance here. Their salvation depends on their willingness to listen and to obey, and, for reasons that have not yet been made clear, they have grown slack (see earlier, 2:1-4).

It is clear from verse twelve that the community which he is addressing is not made up of recent converts. Furthermore, their behaviour would indicate that they have lost touch with the fundamentals of their faith and need to be fed like infants. However, the fact that he goes on to offer them 'solid food' is an indication that he is confident that they are mature enough for it. His warning about the dangers of an immature faith is an extra challenge for them to listen to and heed what he is about to say, for it concerns a 'word of righteousness' (Greek: dikaiosunē, see the commentary on James 1:20). There is a divine order (dikē) established by God. Their salvation depends upon their grasping it and acting in accordance with it. They should be mature Christians by now, and so be able to exercise spiritual discernment.

**<sup>11</sup>About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding** ['hearing'].

**<sup>12</sup>For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food;**

**<sup>13</sup>for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness.**

**<sup>14</sup>But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.**

**<sup>1</sup>Therefore let us be carried forward [NRSV 'go on'] toward perfection,**

**leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God,**

**<sup>2</sup>instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.**

**<sup>3</sup>And we will do this, if God permits.**

The first verb is passive. Going on to perfection is not something which we can initiate or bring to fruition. It is the work of God. Our author is asking us to put ourselves into God's hands and let God, through Christ, carry us to the goal to which he is attracting us by grace. This is the divine order (*dikē*) which we must not resist. As he said earlier: 'how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?'(2:3).

They know the basics of their faith. As Jews they knew the importance of turning away 'from dead works to worship the living God'(9:14). This became even more important to them as Christians when they learning that 'the living God' is the Father of Jesus. It was their 'faith' in Jesus that faced them 'toward God', and opened them to their new life as Christians. As Jews they practised various washings (see 9:10) as a sign of their acknowledgment of their need for purification. They may even have known of the baptism of John. When they joined the Christian community through baptism, they knew the importance of approaching God 'with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water'(10:22).

As Jews they experienced the 'laying on of hands' as a recognition of communion in the blessing of God. When they were baptised and hands were laid upon them, they received Jesus' Spirit in a powerful and memorable way. As Jews they knew of the 'resurrection of the dead'. As Christians they learned how God has raised Jesus and will raise all those united to him. They knew, too, of 'eternal judgment', that is to say, of the judgment of God which transcends our categories of time and space. This was reinforced by the instruction which they received when they were first welcomed into the Christian community, for Jesus stressed the importance of the decisions which we make. If we listen to God's word coming to us through Jesus we will experience 'eternal life'(Matthew 25:46). If we reject God's offer of salvation, we will 'suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might'(2Thessalonians 1:9).

All this they know. Relying on God's blessing, our author declares his intention to move on to further truths that will support them on their way to full maturity as Christians.

The Christians whom he is addressing have been graced with what later theology will call the three sacraments of initiation into the Church. They have been ‘enlightened’ in baptism. Paul speaks of this enlightenment:

It is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

He prays for enlightenment for ‘the eyes of your heart’ (Ephesians 1:18). In baptism we are ‘called out of darkness into God’s marvellous light’ (1Peter 1:10).

They have ‘tasted the heavenly gift’ in the Eucharist. They have ‘shared in the Holy Spirit’ in confirmation. They have “tasted the ‘goodness’ (Greek: *kalos*, ‘beauty’) of the word of God’ through the gift of the sacred Scriptures, and they have experienced in their lives the powerful fruit of the Spirit of the exalted Christ: ‘the powers of the age to come’ (see 2:4).

He knows that Christians can sin, and that repentance is possible, but he warns them that they cannot play with sin or treat it lightly. If by deliberate, calculated rejection of God they ‘fall away’, further repentance is impossible. He is speaking of apostasy which he describes by using two *present* participles. The nuance of the present form of the participles encourages us to translate: ‘they *go on crucifying* again the Son of God’ and ‘they *continue to hold him up to contempt*’. He is describing an obstinate rejection.

There is no other repentance than that provided by God through his Son, and there is no other way to salvation than the ‘purification from sins’(1:3) effected for us by Christ our high priest. If we go on crucifying the Son of God and continue obstinately to hold Jesus up to contempt; if we keep falling away from grace, and keep on trivialising what Christ has done for us, we will find that we will lose all propensity towards good and will find ourselves incapable of genuine conversion.

The examples from nature are traditional. By mentioning blessing and curse, he reminds us that he is speaking in the context of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 11:26-28). To receive God’s blessing we must welcome God’s grace and allow it to bear fruit in our lives.

**<sup>4</sup>For it is impossible to go on restoring [NRSV ‘to restore again’] to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift,**

**and have shared in the Holy Spirit,**

**<sup>5</sup>and have tasted the goodness of the word of God**

**and the powers of the age to come,**

**<sup>6</sup>and then have fallen away,**

**since on their own they go on crucifying [NRSV ‘are crucifying again’] the Son of God and continue to hold [NRSV ‘are holding’] him up to contempt.**

**<sup>7</sup>Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.**

**<sup>8</sup>But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.**

**<sup>9</sup>Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.**

**<sup>10</sup>For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.**

**<sup>11</sup>And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end,**

**<sup>12</sup>so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.**

His warning echoes that given by Jesus himself:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

– Matthew 7:19

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

– John 15:6

However, having warned them, he goes on to express his confidence that such a terrible fate does not await them. He remembers their love, their hope and their faith. These are the three defining qualities that characterise the life of Jesus' disciples (see also 10:22-24). For a reflection on the nature of Christian faith see the commentary on James 1:3; on hope, see 1Peter 1:13; and on love see James 2:8. Paul frequently mentions them together. Two examples will suffice:

We remember before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

– 1Thessalonians 1:3

Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

– 1Corinthians 13:13

The author speaks of their 'serving the saints' (diakoneō see 13:16, 'diakonia'). The community is the beneficiary of the service, but it is God whose will is being done. They are acting as servants of the Lord, mediating God's love and God's grace to others (see 10:32-34; 13:1-3). They will certainly have their reward, sharing in the inheritance enjoyed by the risen Jesus.

In verse twelve he speaks also of their 'patience' (Greek: makrothumia). This is not the kind of patience shown by bearing up under pressure and hardship (Greek: hupomonē). Rather it refers to our sharing in the magnanimous love of God (see Exodus 34:6) by persisting in love in spite of discouragement. It is the first quality mentioned in Paul's famous hymn to love (1Corinthians 13:4).

The author concludes his exhortation by asserting that the promises are secure, because they are based on God's word, in which God's will is clearly revealed. To demonstrate this he turns to Abraham and to the most difficult situation. God had promised Abraham;

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.  
 – Genesis 12:2

God brought Abraham outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them ... So shall your descendants be.'  
 – Genesis 15:5

Yet all this seemed to be put in jeopardy by God seeming to require of Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac, the one through whom the promise was to be realised. It was Abraham's willingness to do this that demonstrated his complete trust in God and that led to the words upon which our author is here commenting;

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.  
 – Genesis 22:16-17

God proved true to his promise against all appearances, and 'Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise', thus demonstrating the truth of the conviction that is constantly affirmed in the Scriptures:

God is not human, that he should lie, or mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?  
 – Numbers 23:19

The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.  
 – Psalm 145:13

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.  
 – Isaiah 40:8

I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.  
 – Jeremiah 4:28

**<sup>13</sup>When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,**

**<sup>14</sup>saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.'**

**<sup>15</sup>And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.**

Our secure hope

**<sup>16</sup>Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.**

**<sup>17</sup>In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath,**

**<sup>18</sup>so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.**

**<sup>19</sup>We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain,**

**<sup>20</sup>where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest for the eternal age [NRSV 'for ever'] according to the order of Melchizedek.**

(Psalm 110:4)

In especially solemn matters God guarantees his promises with an oath.

Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David.

– Psalm 89:35

By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return.

– Isaiah 45:23

Our author, of course, is referring again in a special way to the other oath made by God:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'

– Psalm 110:4

For us, says our author, there are 'two unchangeable things': there is the promise 'which he has spoken to us through a Son whom he has appointed heir of all things' (1:2); and there is the oath which God has sworn in appointing Christ 'priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek' (5:6).

There are times when it seems to us, as it seemed to Abraham, that the very means by which the promises are to be realised are being taken from us. At such times, like Abraham, we must renew our trust and seek 'refuge' in God. God will be true to his word. This is our hope. Let us seize it and hold fast to it.

The Tabernacle had two curtains: the outer curtain at the western entrance (see Exodus 26:36; 36:37; 40:8,28); and the inner veil leading into the inner sanctuary (see Exodus 26:31; 36:35; 40:3; also Matthew 27:51). Only the high priest was permitted to enter past the inner veil (Leviticus 16:2). It is our hope that we will, indeed, pass through this inner veil into the presence of God. The anchor is secure, for Jesus has fixed it there. We are simply to cling to our hope in Jesus and we will enjoy this communion with him. Christ has run on ahead, and has reached the goal and entered into the very presence of God himself in an eternal communion. This gives secure grounds for hope to all 'who have taken refuge': who have abandoned every other security in order to cling to God.



## A high priest like Melchizedek (7:1-28)

In this central section of his oration, the author intends to demonstrate the superiority of the mediatory priesthood exercised by the exalted Christ over that which belonged to the Levitical priests of Judaism. He begins by demonstrating that Jesus experiences and mediates to us something which the Levitical priests aimed at but never achieved: indestructible life with God in the eternal sanctuary of heaven.

The ancient priesthood cannot bring people to perfection (7:11); it is handed on by a time-bound law, and lacks power (7:16); it is not guaranteed by a divine oath (7:20); it cannot overcome death (7:23); its sacrifices are ineffectual and so the priests keep on offering them, even though perfect communion with God remains beyond their power to achieve (7:27-28).

Our author's focus is on Jesus: on the power he is able to exercise because of his 'indestructible life' (7:16), and so on the 'better hope' he gives us of actually drawing 'near to God' (7:19). He searches the sacred Scriptures and, in the light of what he has come to see in Christ, he finds indications of the superiority of Christ already in the scriptural account of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20 - Hebrews 7:1-10), and in the Psalm traditionally associated with the anointing of the king of Judah (Psalm 110:4 - Hebrews 7:11-28).

The author's way of interpreting the scripture appears strange to anyone trained in the modern craft of scientific exegesis. It must be remembered, however, that he was following a method that was common at the time. Exegetes then were not concerned to find the meaning intended by the original human author and understood by the first recipients of the scriptural texts. They were searching for what God intended in inspiring the text. To discover this they loved to play with the text, holding it up to the light to find any possible meaning that might lie hidden in its mysterious depths. They were open to the continuing inspiration of God's Spirit, and knew that their own experiences could throw light back on an ancient text, and so they felt justified in displaying an ancient text as an indication of the further inspired insight which they wished to communicate. As we shall see, this is what our author does now.

**<sup>1</sup>This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; <sup>2</sup>and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything.'**

**His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace.'**

**<sup>3</sup>Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.**

**<sup>4</sup>See how great he is! Even Abraham the patriarch gave him a tenth of the spoils. <sup>5</sup>And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham. <sup>6</sup>But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises.**

**<sup>7</sup>It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. <sup>8</sup>In the one case, tithes are received by those who are mortal; in the other, by one of whom it is testified that he lives.**

**<sup>9</sup>One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, <sup>10</sup>for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.**

The author has been relying on Psalm 110 to demonstrate God's purpose to appoint Christ to a priesthood 'according to Melchizedek' (see 5:6,10; 6:20). Here he goes back to the Genesis narrative (Genesis 14:17-20) to interpret what is said there about the priesthood of Melchizedek.

He finds that Melchizedek blesses Abraham, and uses this to demonstrate his superiority. He finds also that Abraham offers Melchizedek a tenth of everything he has – another indication of superiority. He also makes the point that if Melchizedek, the king-priest, is superior to Abraham, he is obviously superior to Abraham's children, the 'descendants of Levi'.

He adopts current popular etymologies relating Melchizedek to 'justice', and Salem to 'peace', a characteristic blessing of the Messianic age (see Isaiah 9:1-7).

In verse three he argues from what the text does not say, for God's silence can also be a source of revelation. Lineage was an essential aspect of Levitical priesthood. Yet when God spoke these words about the priest Melchizedek, he saw fit to say nothing about Melchizedek's parents, or about a priestly lineage, or about when he was consecrated priest or about his death. Our author argues that these silences were in view of offering us a preview of the kind of priesthood that God intended for his Son.

The Levitical priests receive their priesthood because of their lineage. Not so Melchizedek, and not so Jesus. This is because the Levitical priests are 'mortal'. Nothing is said about Melchizedek's death, because God intends him to prefigure his Son, 'the Son of God' who 'remains forever'.

The purpose of priesthood is to bring about ‘perfection’; that is to say, to bring people into the fullness of communion with God. It is obvious, says our author, that the Levitical priesthood was not able to do this, otherwise why did God (in Psalm 110:4) speak of another priesthood, and one not of the order of Aaron, but of the order of Melchizedek? God did so because he was promising a priesthood that would effectively bring people into full communion with himself, a priesthood that would be exercised by his king-priest Son, who could not be a Levitical priest since he was ‘descended from Judah’. This further demonstrates that his priesthood was not dependent upon lineage, but directly on the word of God.

It is hardly an accident that the word he chooses here for ‘descended’ (7:14) is the verb *anatellō*, used in the following Messianic texts: ‘a star shall *arise* out of Jacob’ (Numbers 24:17). ‘In his days may righteousness *flourish* and peace abound’ (Psalm 72:4). ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch (*anatolē*): for he shall *branch out* (*anatellō*) in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord’ (Zechariah 6:12). ‘I am about to do a new thing; now it *springs forth*’ (Isaiah 43:19). ‘Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may *spring up*, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I the Lord have created it’ (Isaiah 43:8).

Psalm 110:4 demonstrates that God never meant the Levitical priesthood to be anything other than provisional. From the beginning he promised a priesthood that would belong to his Messiah. This royal Messiah, says our author, is Christ, the Son of God, who ‘sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (1:3). His life is ‘indestructible’, and he can do what no Levitical priest was able to do: he can bring us to the perfection of the fullness of divine communion.

**<sup>11</sup>Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood — for the people received the law under this priesthood — what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?**

**<sup>12</sup>For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.**

**<sup>13</sup>Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. <sup>14</sup>For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.**

**<sup>15</sup>It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, <sup>16</sup>one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. <sup>17</sup>For it is attested of him, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’**

(Psalm 110:4)

**<sup>18</sup>There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual <sup>19</sup>(for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.**

<sup>20</sup>**This was confirmed with an oath; for others who became priests took their office without an oath, <sup>21</sup>but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him, ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever”’ —**

<sup>22</sup>**accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.**

<sup>23</sup>**Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; <sup>24</sup>but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.**

<sup>25</sup>**Consequently he is able to go on saving to the uttermost [NRSV ‘for all time to save’] those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.**

That God has, indeed, abrogated the regulations that governed the Levitical priesthood and has introduced ‘a better hope’ which makes it possible now to approach God and to enjoy the fullness of divine communion (see 7:19) is something that God has ‘confirmed with an oath’. Our author has already pointed out the extra security that this provides (see 6:17-20). Here he takes his argument a step further: ‘Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant’. The comparison is with the former ‘covenant’(Greek: *diathēkē*), the commitment which God gave through Moses and which found expression in the law. It included the ways in which God’s people were to behave in response to God’s promise, including the regulations concerning the Levitical priesthood. This old covenant is included in the ways in which ‘long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets’(1:1). Now, ‘in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son’(1:2), and has committed himself, under oath, to draw us into the fullness of divine communion. Furthermore, Jesus has offered himself as a ‘guarantee’(Greek: *egguos*); he has offered himself (his own life) to be our guarantor. As we read in the Book of Sirach: ‘Do not forget the kindness of your guarantor, for he has given his life for you’(Sirach 29:15).

He returns also to the point already made that the Levitical priests die (see 7:8). This is why the priesthood has to be continually handed on from father to son. Our high priest, however, continues to exercise the power of God from his seat ‘at the right hand of the Majesty on high’(1:3). He has ‘the power of an indestructible life’(7:16), and so ‘he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever’.

The pastoral implication of this is that ‘those who approach God through him’ will certainly be saved. The fullness of eternal life in communion with God is the ‘salvation’ which is our inheritance (see 1:14). Jesus is our ‘champion’ who has made salvation possible for us by the victory which he achieved in the struggle against sin and death (2:14). He is now ‘source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’(5:9). As our high priest, he ‘lives to make intercession for us’. All our needs are met by God through the mediatory prayer of his Son (see 2:18; 4:14-16). Paul, too, speaks of ‘Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us’(Romans 8:34), and John offers these comforting words: ‘if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ’(1John 2:1).

Verse twenty-six describes our high priest, Jesus, in cultic terms. He is 'holy' (Greek: *hosios*), in the sense that he exists wholly within the realm of the sacred. The psalmist is confident: 'you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption' (Psalm 16:10, applied to the risen Christ in Acts 2:27). He is 'undefiled' (Greek: *akakos*), in the sense that he is untouched by anything that is evil. Like the sacrificial animals, he is 'undefiled' (Greek: *amiantos*), in the sense that there is nothing inhibiting his being united to God. He is 'separated from sinners', not in the sense that he fails to communicate with us sinners to draw us with him into holiness, but in the sense that he himself is innocent of sin (see 4:15), thus perfectly fulfilling another ritual requirement for the exercise of priesthood.

In verse twenty-seven, our author extrapolates from the high priestly sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and speaks of all the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. They offered animal sacrifices twice daily (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3-8; Sirach 45:14). Jesus offered himself (see also 9:14,28). Having done this, there is no other sacrifice to offer. The purpose of sacrifice has been perfectly achieved. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the word that defines this whole section is the word 'perfect'. The verb *teleioō* is a technical word for the consecration of a priest. It also means to bring something or someone to their goal (*telos*). Jesus has attained perfection himself in the eternal communion of love which is the very being of God. As our high priest he is able to draw us into this same communion, thus bringing us with him into the heavenly sanctuary where we, too, can share in this same divine communion.

**<sup>26</sup>For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.**

**<sup>27</sup>Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself.**

**<sup>28</sup>For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.**

A priest who has attained perfection (8:1 - 9:28)

Before beginning what is the central section of this oration, we offer an overview of its structure. The author is speaking of the upward movement of mediation, from mankind to God. As he has just stated, Jesus achieved this movement perfectly and ‘once for all when he offered himself’(7:27). This theme of self-offering is central to the section to which we are about to listen (9:14,26). Christ’s self-offering achieves eternal redemption.

1. The insufficiency of the old ministry, covenant and institutions and their replacement.
  - a. The ministry of our priest is superior, because he is minister ‘in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up’. He is the mediator of a superior covenant, based on superior promises. The old *cult-ministry* is only an imitation of the real, heavenly one (8:1-6).
  - b. The old *covenant* is imperfect and has been made obsolete. God promised a new covenant (8:7-13).
  - c. The *institutions* of the old cult are unable to achieve their goal. They cannot effect salvation (9:1-10).
2. The new institutions, covenant, and ministry are efficacious and definitive.
  - c<sup>1</sup>. Christ our high priest offered himself and this was effective in taking him once for all into the full presence of God, achieving for us an eternal redemption (9:11-14).
  - b<sup>1</sup>. Christ is the mediator of the new *covenant* whereby through his offering of his life (blood) we receive the eternal heritage that was promised (9:15-23).
  - a<sup>1</sup>. The uniqueness of the offering of Christ who has entered heaven (9:24-28).

The author alerts us to the fact that he is about to deal with ‘the main point’ of his address. He focuses on the exalted Christ, echoing his opening description of Christ as seated ‘at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (1:3). He describes Christ, our high priest, as a ‘minister’ (Greek: leitourgos), a word commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the cult ministry carried out by the priests (see Isaiah 61:6). The Jewish high priests carried out their ministry in a tent which, as is demonstrated from Exodus 25:40, was only an earthly copy, a ‘sketch and shadow’, of ‘the sanctuary and the true tent’ which God showed to Moses on the mountain. It is in this true tent that Jesus carries out his priestly ministry. His ministry is, therefore, necessarily ‘more excellent’.

In verse six we find the first explicit use of the term ‘mediator’ (Greek: mesitēs), though the author has been speaking of Jesus’ mediation from the beginning. The whole of creation is an expression of the eternal wisdom which has been perfectly expressed in Jesus (1:2). It is the exalted Jesus who sustains everything in being, drawing creation to its goal by his powerful words (1:3). He tasted death for everyone (2:9). He liberates us and atones for us (2:15,17). It is because of him that we draw near to God (7:19). ‘Mediator’ is a term used also by Paul: ‘There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human’ (1Timothy 2:5). Being divine and human he is in a perfect position to mediate. Being a priest who is both trustworthy because he is in perfect communion with God, and merciful because he is in perfect communion with us, he is in a perfect position to mediate. He has opened up the way to God for us by being the first to go through the veil and reach the goal for which we are all created. There in the sanctuary of heaven he ‘lives to make intercession for us’ (7:25).

A small observation on the author’s rhetorical style and careful structuring of his oration. Though the NRSV speaks of ‘Jesus’ in verse six, the Greek has simply ‘he’. The author deliberately refrains from using Jesus’ name, for he wants to locate it as the central word of the whole book, and so delays using it till 9:11.

**<sup>1</sup>Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, <sup>2</sup>a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.**

**<sup>3</sup>For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.**

**<sup>4</sup>Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. <sup>5</sup>They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’**

(Exodus 25:40)

**<sup>6</sup>But he [NRSV ‘Jesus’] has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.**

**7For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.**

**8God finds fault with them when he says: 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah;**

**9not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.**

**10This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.'**

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

**13In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.**

Having demonstrated from scripture that the cult-ministry of the Levitical priests in the earthy tent was never more than a secondary and earthy attempt to copy the real priestly ministry which could be carried out only in the real dwelling place of God in heaven, our author goes on now to demonstrate that the first covenant cannot have been perfect, or God would not have promised a new one.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 demonstrates that it had always been God's will to enter into a new covenant with us, one 'enacted through better promises'(8:6). This new covenant will be one that is 'in their minds', 'written on their hearts'. At last God's people will live in communion with him. Jeremiah expresses this in terms frequently used of the communion experienced in the sanctuary:

I will place my dwelling in your midst ...  
And I will walk among you, and will be your  
God, and you shall be my people.

– Leviticus 26:11-12

Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God ... Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments ... and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.

– Deuteronomy 26:17-19

My dwelling place shall be with them; and  
I will be their God, and they shall be my  
people.

– Ezekiel 37:27

The reference to God being 'merciful'(Greek: hileōs) towards iniquities' picks up an echo of his reference earlier to the ministry of the high priest in offering a sacrifice of atonement (Greek: hilaskomai, 2:17). As to God's 'remembering their sin no more', we recall the opening description of the 'Son' as having made 'purification for sins'(1:3). The promise of the new covenant has been fulfilled in Christ.



Having declared that God, by promising a new covenant, demonstrated his intention to make ‘the first covenant obsolete’(8:13), the author turns to the priestly ministry regulated by the laws governing the first covenant. The inherent imperfection of the first covenant is demonstrated by the limited access to God which the priestly ministry gave and the imperfect nature of the offerings. He will go on to show that God has replaced the cult of ‘the earthly sanctuary’ with the priestly ministry of Christ. This is thus an example of the obsolete first covenant being superseded by the perfect new one.

He describes the contents of the ‘earthy sanctuary’ in which the Jewish priests of ‘the first covenant’ carried out their ministry. He refers to the tent and not the temple because, as he has already noted (see 8:5), God’s instruction to Moses on Mount Sinai concerned the tent. His main interest is in the fact that it was in two sections. There was the sanctuary called ‘the Holy Place’ in what he calls the ‘first tent’, and there was the sanctuary called ‘the Holy of Holies’ in what he refers to as the ‘second’ tent.

The furnishings are described in the Book of Exodus. In ‘the Holy Place’(the ‘hêkal’) were the lamp stand (the menorah, Exodus 26:35), and the table with the bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:23-20; 26:35; see Leviticus 24:6). Standing just outside ‘the second curtain’ was ‘the golden altar of incense’(Exodus 30:6; 40:26). ‘Behind’, in the ‘Holy of Holies’(the ‘debîr’) were the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus (25:10-15; 37:1-5), the golden urn holding the manna (see Exodus 16:33-34), the staff of Aaron (see Numbers 17:16-24), and the tablets of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 10:2). The wings of the two cherubim all but touched above the ark of the covenant, ‘overshadowing the mercy seat’, thus creating a sanctuary for the presence of God’s glory. We recall God’s promise:

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands.

– Exodus 25:22

**<sup>1</sup>Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary.**

**<sup>2</sup>For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lamp stand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place.**

**<sup>3</sup>Behind the second curtain was a tent [‘compartment of the tent’] called the Holy of Holies.**

**<sup>4</sup>In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant;**

**<sup>5</sup>above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.**

**Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.**

**<sup>6</sup>Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties;**

**<sup>7</sup>but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people.**

**<sup>8</sup>By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing.**

**<sup>9</sup>This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, <sup>10</sup>but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.**

Having described the furnishings of the outer and inner sanctuary (the first and the second tents), our author turns his attention to the priestly ministry that takes place in each. Verse six emphasises the continuous aspect of the priestly ministry that takes place in ‘the first tent’. We find the following description in the Book of Chronicles:

They offer to the Lord every morning and every evening burnt offerings and fragrant incense, set out the rows of bread on the table of pure gold, and care for the golden lamp stand so that its lamps may burn every evening.

– 2Chronicles 13:11

In verse seven he speaks of the ministry of the high priest in the ‘second’ (tent), the ‘Holy of Holies’ (9:3). He highlights the fact that it takes place only ‘once a year’, that he never enters ‘without blood’, and that the offering is made for sins committed ‘unintentionally’. Because the high priest is himself a sinner, his offering is made also for himself. For the word ‘offer’ in verse seven, our author uses a word, *prospheō*, which is never used in this sense in the Greek Bible. He already has Jesus’ self-offering in mind and is preparing us for his development of that theme in the following section (see 9:25-28).

In verse eight he concludes that while the first tent is still standing the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed. He underlines the importance of this conclusion by mentioning ‘the Holy Spirit’ who not only inspired the sacred texts upon which he is reflecting, but who also has enlightened the author to see this deeper meaning contained within them.

The ‘sanctuary’ to which he is referring is not the ‘earthly sanctuary’ (9:1), ‘the sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one’ (8:5), whether ‘the Holy Place’ (9:2), or ‘the Holy of Holies’ (9:3). He has just described priests entering these places. He is speaking of the ‘sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, had set up’ (8:2). He is speaking of the sanctuary entered by our high priest, Christ, who ‘did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered heaven itself’ (9:24).

It is clear that entry into this sanctuary, the sanctuary of heaven, the sanctuary in which we can enjoy perfect and continuous communion with God, is not effected by the priestly ministry carried out in the earthy sanctuaries under the regulations of the first covenant. Some communion with God is effected in the Holy of Holies through the ministry of the high priest in the second tent, but it is only once a year, and it deals only with unintentional sins. In 'this present time', while the 'first tent' stands, and while the way into the presence of God has to pass through it, we cannot experience perfect communion of mind and heart with God. There had to come a time when God would set everything right.

It is not enough for our body to be purified of external defilements by external washings. Our 'conscience' needs to be cleansed. New regulations were needed to govern a new cult. We needed a new high priest who would take us right through into the presence of God. This has now happened in Christ, and it is to this that our author now turns.

**<sup>11</sup>But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come,**

**then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation),**

**<sup>12</sup>he entered once for all into the Holy Place,**

**not with the blood of goats and calves, but through [NRSV 'with'] his own blood,**

**thus obtaining eternal redemption.**

**<sup>13</sup>For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,**

**<sup>14</sup>how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!**

With superb organisational skill, our author has structured his oration so that the words 'Christ high priest' are in the exact centre. God has 'set things right' (9:10). The good things that were promised 'have come'. We have our perfect high priest, Christ. He has entered into the presence of God 'once for all'. He has obtained for us an 'eternal redemption': we can enjoy perfect divine communion forever. As high priest he could not enter the sanctuary 'without blood' (9:7), but Christ did not enter 'with the blood of goats and calves'. All that could do was to rid the body of any defilement that would exclude a person from entering the presence of God. Christ entered 'through his own blood', through offering his life, offering himself without blemish to God'. Because of his perfect communion in love with God, a communion effected 'through the eternal Spirit' he was able to purify not just our bodies but our inner selves in our relationship with God.

In verse eleven he tells us that Jesus' high priestly ministry took place in 'the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands', the one revealed to Moses on the mountain, and of which the tent of the wilderness was only a human, earthly, and imperfect copy.

Scholars are divided in their understanding of what the author intends by this tent. Some argue that he is speaking of 'heaven', the transcendent realm of God's eternal presence. This fits with the verb 'having come' and the use of 'through' in its local sense. Others are persuaded that the position of this statement at the exact centre of his argument and the parallel established between 'through the tent' and 'through his own blood' point to the 'through' being used not in a local but in an instrumental sense. They argue that the 'tent' is the glorified body of the exalted Christ.

Christ offered his body, his human life, as a gift in obedient love to his Father. He poured out his blood for us, and this self-offering was the way to the eternal sanctuary. In the resurrection, his body was transformed in divine glory, and so he was able to enter into the sanctuary of heaven. The body that was fitted for Jesus, enabling him to enter the world, was a 'body of flesh and blood' like ours (2:14). The body that was fitted for him, enabling him to enter the sanctuary of heaven is the once-sacrificed and now glorious body, that is better, more perfect, not of this creation, not made by human hands (compare John 2:19-21). Through this body (this 'tent') Christ is able to enjoy the perfection of human communion with God.

In an earlier statement our author claimed: ‘Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek’ (5:8-10). Here he speaks of Jesus perfect priestly offering as being the offering of himself (his life, his blood), and as obtaining for us ‘eternal redemption’. The language is traditional, going back to the action of God redeeming his people from slavery in Egypt:

I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you.

– Exodus 6:6

Hosea uses the same word for redeeming from death:

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?

– Hosea 13:14

The psalmist speaks of redemption from sin and from one’s enemies:

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

– Psalm 130:8

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

– Psalm 107:2-3

It is also language that we find throughout the New Testament:

The Son of Man to give his life a ransom for many.

– Matthew 20:28 (Mark 10:45)

Paul writes:

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

– Titus 2:14

He gave himself a ransom for all.

– 1 Timothy 2:6

And Peter:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors.

– 1 Peter 1:18

**<sup>15</sup>For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.**

**<sup>16</sup>Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established.**

**<sup>17</sup>For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.**

**<sup>18</sup>Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood.**

**<sup>19</sup>For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, <sup>20</sup>saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.' <sup>21</sup>And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship.**

**<sup>22</sup>Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood**

This is the 'new covenant' promised by God (8:8), the 'better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises', and Jesus is its mediator (8:6). Through his gift of himself – a gift expressed in his death (the pouring out of his blood) – he has made it possible for us to do what the priests of the first covenant could not do: we can receive our 'eternal inheritance'.

In verse fifteen, he begins to explore the reasons for Jesus' death. He does so in cultic terms. When the people accepted God's offer of a covenant, they slew animals in sacrifice. In effect they were saying: let what is happening to this animal happen to us if we do not keep our part of the covenant. The fact is that 'under the first covenant' there were 'transgressions'. This means that those who transgressed should die, and there was no cultic escape from this sentence, except for unwitting defilements which they might happen to incur, and for 'sins committed unintentionally by the people' (9:7). There were, as we have seen, ways of dealing with these. When it comes to deliberate breaking of the covenant, however, there was no cultic remedy. Our author is claiming that Jesus, by offering himself, and by pouring out his blood, not for his own sins (for he was sinless) but for ours, 'redeems us' from the death which is our due.

In verses eighteen to twenty-one he recalls the ritual described in Exodus 24:3-8. Many of the details in verse nineteen are not mentioned in the Sinai accounts. They have been included here from other rituals in order to cover the whole of the cultic system. He introduces the word 'this' in verse twenty. Some suggest that he does so under the influence of the last supper account in which Jesus declares: '*This* is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for the casting away of sins' (Matthew 26:28).

The words ‘forgiveness of sins’ translate the single Greek word  $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\iota\sigma\mu\alpha$ . It is perhaps best to stay with the cultic setting and speak of ‘defilement’ rather than ‘sins’. Hebrews has a rich vocabulary for the cultic reality described here (including sins). Each word has its own nuance. The author speaks of purifying a defilement that clings to the sinner (1:3); of taking a person into the sphere of the sacred and thus protecting against evil (2:11); of bringing a sinner into contact with divine mercy (2:17); of saving a person (5:9); of renewing a sinner by bringing about a change of mind and heart (6:6); of releasing from slavery (9:12,15); of removing something that traps one in sin (10:11).

He also uses a number of different images for sin. Besides the most common image of missing the mark (Greek: *hamartia*), he speaks of disobedience (2:2); of rebellion (1:9); of drifting (2:11); of being enslaved (2:15); of having a hardened heart (3:8); of being deceived (3:13); of being embittered (3:16); of not treating what is sacred with reverence (9:13).

When he speaks here of the heavenly realities needing to be purified, he seems to be speaking metaphorically of the ‘consciences’ of those who are inheritors of eternal salvation. True cleansing is a matter of the heart and mind and is achieved only by the Spirit. The author highlights the priestly mediating role of Christ by stating, once again, that our high priest is in the presence of God ‘on our behalf’ (see 2:18; 4:15; 7:25).

Once again he stresses that the self-giving of Christ in death is the decisive event of ‘these last days’ (1:1). Paul speaks in similar terms of ‘the fullness of time’ (Galatians 4:4) and of ‘the end of the ages’ (1 Corinthians 10:11; see also 1 Peter 1:20).

<sup>22b</sup>and without the shedding of blood there is no casting off defilement [NRSV ‘forgiveness of sins’].

<sup>23</sup>Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these.

<sup>24</sup>For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

<sup>25</sup>Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; <sup>26</sup>for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world.

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

**<sup>27</sup>And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment,**

**<sup>28</sup>so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.**

Having just said that Christ offered himself in sacrifice ‘to remove sin’(9:26), our author directs our attention to the future, for though we are already enjoying the beginnings of the fruits of salvation, full salvation, perfect communion with God will happen only when Christ appears a second time and takes us with him into the sanctuary of heaven.

In speaking of Christ’s offering he uses an expression which echoes the following from the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord:

I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet *he bore the sin of many*, and made intercession for the transgressors.

– Isaiah 53:12

When he speaks of Jesus appearing again to bring us the fullness of salvation, his focus is on the eagerness with which we are awaiting this blessed encounter. This is a theme found elsewhere in the New Testament:

Through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

– Galatians 5:5

You wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

– 1Corinthians 1:7

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

– Romans 8:19,23,25

Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

– Philippians 3:13-14

Talk of salvation brings us to the final point of this central section of the oration.



## The cause of eternal salvation (10:1-18)

In this central section the author's aim is to encourage the community to whom the oration is addressed to renew and deepen their commitment to Christ. Through demonstrating the superiority of the priesthood of Christ, he is assuring them that they will enjoy full communion with God if they continue to go to God through him.

A priest carries out his ministry in a sanctuary. Our author began by demonstrating that Jesus experiences and mediates to us something which the Levitical priests aimed at but never achieved: indestructible life with God in the eternal sanctuary of heaven (7:1-28).

A priest takes our offering and offers it to God. In the part just completed, he demonstrated that Jesus offered himself and in so doing removed from us all defilement that could prevent our coming before God.

A priest mediates to us the blessings of God. In this final section, he demonstrates that the blessing which Christ the high priest mediates to us from God removes us effectively, once for all, and eternally, from sin, and sanctifies us, drawing us effectively to our goal: the perfection of eternal communion with God. Salvation is a topic that he has already touched on earlier in the oration:

Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit *salvation*?

– Hebrews 1:14

How can we escape if we neglect so great a *salvation*?

– Hebrews 2:3

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their *salvation* perfect through sufferings.

– Hebrews 2:10

He prepared us for his development of the theme of salvation when he introduced the whole of this central section:

Having been made perfect [the theme just completed, 8:1 - 9:28], he became the source of *eternal salvation* for all who obey him [the theme we are about to begin], having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek [covered in 7:1-28)].

– Hebrews 5:9-10

This was picked up again in the final statement of the previous section:

Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but *to save* those who are eagerly waiting for him.

– Hebrews 9:28

**<sup>1</sup>Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. <sup>2</sup>Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? <sup>3</sup>But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. <sup>4</sup>For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**

**<sup>5</sup>Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; <sup>6</sup>in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. <sup>7</sup>Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).'**

[Psalm 40:6-8 ]

**<sup>8</sup>When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), <sup>9</sup>then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. <sup>10</sup>And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.**

Verse one reiterates a theme that has been expressed earlier, when we were told that the Levitical priests 'offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one' (8:5). We need 'the true form'(Greek: εἰκόνις), an image which gives a true expression of the realities revealed by God. Paul expresses much the same thought: 'These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ' (Colossians 2:7). We have already been told also that 'the law made nothing perfect'(7:19). Something else was needed if we who approach God were to enter the sanctuary and experience perfect communion with God. We cannot be in perfect communion with God until we are 'cleansed (Greek: katharizō) once for all'. So long as we are conscious of sin, and until the burden of sin has been 'taken away', we cannot be at home with God. This burden cannot be lifted by the blood of bulls and goats.

Once again, our author goes to the sacred Scriptures where he finds a text in which God has indicated that the instrument that would effectively remove sin would be a human body. The text, says our author, refers to Christ. The teaching that conventional sacrifices without obedience cannot be acceptable to God is traditional. Samuel speaks for this tradition when he says: 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams'(1Samuel 15:22). Likewise the psalmist: 'You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise'(Psalm 51:16-17). Our author chooses Psalm 40 because (only in the Greek version) it speaks of the 'body'. It is because Jesus shares our 'body', our 'flesh and blood'(2:14), and because as man he faithfully did God's will, without sin (4:15), that 'by God's will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all'.

The priests of the old covenant *stand* day after day carrying out the regulations of the cult. They offer the same sacrifices again and again, which is itself proof that they are ineffectual in taking away sin. By contrast, Christ, as our author indicated at the beginning of his oration, ‘*sat* down at the right hand of God’ (see 1:3). His offering has been completed. The priestly ministry required of him by God’s will has been accomplished and its purpose has been achieved. We have yet to welcome the salvation that has been won for us. We have yet to respond perfectly to grace and to enter the sanctuary. In the meantime, therefore, Christ our priest waits for the full destruction of evil in our lives. This is why he continues to make intercession for us (see 7:25). But ‘by a single offering’ he has made salvation possible for us if we choose to accept it. He has carried out the ministry to which all priestly ministry aimed, but which previously it was unable to achieve. His self-offering has ‘sanctified’ us; that is to say, our sins have been taken away and thus purified we can enter definitively into the presence of God where we can enjoy the fullness of divine communion.

The Holy Spirit who inspired Jeremiah to recount God’s promise and so to encourage us to look forward with keen expectation to its fulfilment, is now inspiring us to see that the promise has become a present reality as a result of the self-offering of Christ. The focus has moved from a past promise expressing God’s will to the Christian community which is enjoying the fulfilment of the promise.

Earlier he concluded that ‘without the shedding of blood there is no casting off defilement’ (Greek: *aphesis*; 9:22). He speaks again of this *aphesis*, defining it in terms of the casting off of ‘sins’ and ‘lawless deeds’, that is, deeds that are done against God’s expressed will. The offering of Christ has decisively cast this defilement off, so there is no more need for any ‘offering for sin’. Perfect unhindered access to God is possible for all ‘those who approach’ (10:1).

**<sup>11</sup>And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.**

**<sup>12</sup>But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’**

**<sup>13</sup>and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ [Psalm 110:1]**

**<sup>14</sup>For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.**

**<sup>15</sup>And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, <sup>16</sup>This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,’**

**<sup>17</sup>he also adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’ (Jeremiah 31:33-34).**

**<sup>18</sup>Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.**

<sup>19</sup>**Therefore,  
brothers and  
sisters [NRSV  
'friends'],  
since we have an  
accorded right  
[NRSV 'confi-  
dence']  
to enter the  
sanctuary by the  
blood of Jesus,  
<sup>20</sup>by the new  
and living way  
that he opened  
for us through  
the curtain (that  
is, through his  
flesh),  
<sup>21</sup>and since we  
have a great  
priest over the  
house of God,  
<sup>22</sup>let us approach  
with a true heart**

The author has now completed his main thesis. He concludes with an appeal to those who are Jesus' brothers and sisters (see 2:11). 'Through the blood of Jesus' we have been authorised to enter the sanctuary of God's presence. 'Through his flesh' he has opened up for us a new way leading to the life of perfect communion with God.

This accent on Jesus' blood and flesh stresses, once again, that it was as one of us, sharing 'the blood and flesh' (2:14) that Jesus offered himself to his Father. He obtained eternal redemption for us, because 'he entered once for all into the Holy Place with his own blood' (9:12). It was through his offering of his blood that he has freed our hearts and minds from sin (see 9:14). As our 'champion' (2:10), he did not bypass the struggle that is part of the human condition. Rather, it was as a man that he remained faithful. In challenging us to take the way that Jesus has opened up for us, our author is reminding us that we, too, cannot bypass our vulnerable humanity. We, like Jesus, will find our fulfilment in remaining faithful in the changing circumstances of our daily life, and amid the sufferings that inevitably come our way. The Eucharistic allusion expressed in the reference to blood and flesh will become apparent later in the exhortation.

In speaking of 'the way' (Greek: *hodos* see also 9:8) our author causes us to recall the Exodus (Greek: *exodos*, 11:22). We also recall that Christianity itself was called 'the way' (see Acts 9:2; 18:25; 24:14). It is a 'new' way, as our author has been at pains to demonstrate throughout the oration. It is a 'living' way, in the same sense that the water promised by Jesus is 'living water' (John 4:10), and the bread is 'living bread' (John 6:51), and we are built into the temple as 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:4). It is the way that comes from the heart of God, the source of all life, and that leads us back to this same heart where we will experience the full communion in love in which eternal life consists.

The right to enter the sanctuary that we have because of Jesus is mentioned also by Paul: 'In Christ Jesus our Lord we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him' (Ephesians 3:12). We can 'approach with a true heart', and not an 'unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God' (3:12), because, as we have already heard: 'Christ was faithful over God's house as a Son, and we are his house' (3:6). 'Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession' (4:14).

Approaching the sanctuary with a true heart, means living a life of faith, hope and love in community. These three characteristic Christian qualities have already been noted by our author, in the inverse order, in the exhortation with which he began this central section of his oration:

God will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

– Hebrews 6:10-12

He begins here with faith and a reminder of our first entry into the Christian community when, in baptism, ‘our hearts were sprinkled clean’ (with his blood), the defilement of sin was removed (see 10:18), and ‘our bodies were washed with pure water’. Peter uses similar language when he speaks of us as ‘chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’ (1Peter 1:2); and of ‘baptism which now saves you —not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God’ (1Peter 3:21-22).

He then speaks of hope, recalling his earlier call: ‘We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever’ (6:19-20). Love and good deeds belong together. How could we truly love Jesus without wanting to share his mission by loving others with his love?

None of this is an individual matter. Belonging to the one Christ, we belong to each other. Hence the central importance of the Christian assembly in which we come together as Jesus’ family to realise our communion in Christ. Living as we are ‘in these last days’ (1:1), it will not be long till Jesus comes to take us into the sanctuary with him in an eternal life of love-communion with God. This sentiments are echoed by Paul: ‘the day is near’ (Romans 13:12). Likewise James: ‘the coming of the Lord is near’ (James 5:8).

<sup>22b</sup>**in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**

<sup>23</sup>**Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.**

<sup>24</sup>**And let us think of one another, to stimulate love and good deeds [NRSV ‘let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds’],**

<sup>25</sup>**not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another,**

**and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

**<sup>26</sup>For if we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,**

**<sup>27</sup>but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.**

**<sup>28</sup>Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'**

(Deuteronomy 17:6)

**<sup>29</sup>How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?**

**<sup>30</sup>For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'**

(Deuteronomy 32:35-36)

**<sup>31</sup>It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

The terrible alternative to living a life of faith, hope and love in the Christian community is spelt out here in terms that echo the severe warning which he gave in the exhortation with which he began this section (see 6:4-6). Under the regulations governing cult in the first covenant, there were sacrifices for unintentional sin. However 'whoever acts high-handedly affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt'(Numbers 15:30-31). We have already heard that through Jesus' self offering we can be cleansed of the defilement even of deliberate sin. However, to 'wilfully persist in sin' is another matter. It is to reject the only sacrifice capable of cleansing us of our defilement; it is to turn away from what Paul calls 'the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation'(Ephesians 1:13).

The 'fury of fire' is a traditional image, taken from war, to speak of the total destruction of the forces of evil that follows on the victory of God.

Verse twenty-nine describes in Christian terms what it means to 'wilfully persist in sin'(10:26). It is to treat the Son of God with utter contempt. It is to desecrate the blood of the covenant, dismissing Jesus' gift of himself when he poured his life for us. It is to be filled with insolent pride (Greek: en-hubrizō) casting God's offer of grace back into his face, rejecting the Spirit of love that invites us into divine communion. We are reminded of Jesus' warning of the consequences of sinning against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). If we dismiss the Spirit of God, we will have rejected the only means by which we can find meaning in life and purification from sin. We will lock ourselves into sin and its consequences. We cannot continue in evil and avoid the consequences. It is this point that our author stresses by adapting part of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:35-36).

He reminds them of their heroic past and how they remained faithful in the face of public abuse and violence, including losing their property. He does not say whether this was by official judgment, or simply by popular looting. This description of the persecution which they once suffered is too weak to describe the suffering of the Christians of Rome under Nero. If the oration is addressed to Rome it could be referring to the expulsion under Claudius in 49AD (see Acts 18:2). However it could apply to anywhere in the sprawling Roman empire, where sporadic persecutions instigated by the local populace were common. In the east, over and above the cult of the local deities, the various cities saw in the cult of the emperor a way of expressing their loyalty and gaining imperial favour. The Christians avoided public festivities and did not take part in the civic cults. When things went badly they proved easy scapegoats for public anger. They were accused of being atheists, and so of bringing about divine displeasure. It took little persuasion to stir the people up against them. This was in spite of the obvious love of the community which continued to attract people to it.

The struggles associated with the battlefield or with the stadium offer their own reward. The reward promised here is no ordinary prize. It is the communion in love with God which is the very goal of our existence and that for which we long. It is our heart's desire. Our author reminds them how, in the past, they followed the teaching of Jesus: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:19-20). 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven' (Matthew 5:11-12).

As he has just said: 'Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful' (10:23).

**<sup>32</sup>But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, <sup>33</sup>sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.**

**<sup>34</sup>For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.**

**<sup>35</sup>Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward.**

**<sup>36</sup>For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.**

**<sup>37</sup>For ‘in only a little while – how little, how little’ (Isaiah 26:20) [NRSV ‘in a very little while’]**

**‘the one who is coming will come and will not delay; <sup>38</sup>but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back’ (Habakkuk 2:3-4)**

**<sup>39</sup>But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so gain and are in possession of life [NRSV ‘are saved’].**

These verses announce the following section of the oration. The ‘endurance’ called for (also 10:32) is the endurance shown by Christ (see 12:1-2). Like him, they are to ‘do the will of God’ (see 10:5-10). Many texts in the New Testament speak of what our author spoke of earlier as ‘the promised eternal inheritance’ (9:15):

Your endurance you will gain your souls.

– Luke 21:19

Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

– Revelation 3:10

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

– 1 Corinthians 2:9

You are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

– 1 Peter 1:9

You will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

– 1 Peter 5:4

In verse thirty-seven our author seems to be alluding to a text which his listeners may have used to justify their withdrawal from public confession of their faith. Isaiah writes: ‘Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves *for only a little while – how little, how little*, until the wrath is past’ (Isaiah 26:20). If this is correct, he alters its sense by linking it with a text from Habakkuk which he also adjusts to draw out what he sees as its deeper meaning by adding ‘the one who is coming’ (referring it to Christ). It is Jesus who will not hold back. So he adds: ‘My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back’. It is their faithfulness that matters. If we cling to Christ we will be saved and live.