

SERIES Operating the Church (part 1)
 SERMON **Strength in Connection (Hebrews 10.1–25)**¹
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—PRAY—

1. STRENGTH FROM THE WORD

Before we get to our passage and see what it means to have strength in connection as God’s people (*His church*), we need to consider two general, big-picture details—both dealing with the nature and purpose of the letter to the Hebrews. First of all, the letter is not really a letter. It’s more like a sermon that’s been written and mailed to a local congregation. We get that from what the writer says right near the end: “**Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, bear with my message** [= λόγος, *word*] **of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you briefly**” (13.22). Just for fun: I love not only how nearly-5000 words is considered a “brief” sermon but also that the writer implicitly admits that so much more could be said. (*That’s a confession I think we could all make when we study deeply the truths of Scripture, especially how they find their fulfillment in Christ*). But let’s get back to this passage.

The phrase “**message of exhortation**” (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως) appears in Acts 13.15: “**After the reading from the Law and the prophets, the synagogue officials sent to [Paul and Barnabas], ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation** [λόγος παρακλήσεως] **for the people, say it**” (NASB). Since this is happening in a synagogue, and they’re following the usual order of service, they’re basically saying: “**If there’s a sermon you can preach from the reading, we’d like to hear it.**” And we find a similar order of service for the gatherings of believers in Christ. After the encouragement that, “**For it is for this [gospel-ministry] we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers**” (1 Tim 4.10, NASB), Paul instructs Timothy: “**Prescribe and teaching these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example for those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation** [τῆ παρακλήσει] **and teaching**” (1 Tim 4.11–13, NASB).

Notice the call for faithful service to gospel-ministry and the summons for faithful hope in who God is and all that He’s done in the world—especially for His people. Along with that, notice the call for the faithful gathering of God’s people and the summons for faithful communal worship of God—obviously including songs and prayers, but especially the reading of His Word, followed by the exhortation and teaching of its truth and relevance for daily life. An essential way God used to bless and strengthen His people. Now, come back to Heb 13, which identifies the whole letter as a “**message [or word] of exhortation.**” One that is chock-full of God’s Word and aimed at expounding His truth and how believers are to respond in faithful allegiance and obedience. That, then, would seem to raise the obvious question: “**Why is the writer exhorting these believers in Christ? What’s the situation or even the problem (or problems) that they faced, which required exhortation, and how did he go about doing it?**”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations will follow the New English Translation (NET).

Based on details from the text, there are some general struggles and one major issue. In fact, the major one seems to be the result of the general ones becoming normal in the life of the congregation. Things like: (1) a resistance toward or even a moving away from the deeper teachings of Scripture and a preference for or returning to the basics—the easy parts; (2) not seeing the need to grow and mature in faith; (3) deprioritizing regular worship, especially as a communal gathering; (4) weakening of the defenses against the allures or pleasures of the world; and (5) being worn down by persistent external criticism and/or persecution because of their faith and life in Christ. And the major issue, which (*again*) likely results from those, is that: these believers in Rome, living under the reign of Nero, are being tempted to give up on Christ and to leave the church (*His people*). The old language here is, “to fall away from the faith.”²

But the writer loves the people and the church so much that he does not want to see that consideration become a reality. And so, he is compelled to write this sermon-letter (*his “message of exhortation”*) for the purpose of reminding them why their faithful allegiance, identity, obedience, and life in Christ is not only a gracious blessing from God but also the blessed existence they could never find anywhere else or ever achieve on their own. A truth that even applies to their former life in Judaism. As the writer shows: everything in Israel’s old covenant simply foreshadowed (*or pointed the way*) to what would be done in the new covenant. And more to the point: as the OT reveals, everything in the old covenant could not

² That phrase has often raised the question, “Falling away into what?,” which has tended to be answered in two ways—ways that are often used to help identify the recipients of the sermon-letter. (*What follows is a rather brief summary of the scholarly debate on this topic, which means hardly of this is original with me. If you want to study more, I’ll can give you some good resources*). Option one says the writer is speaking out against the external influence of religious systems foreign to and in contradiction with Judaism. Ideas and beliefs that have begun to make their way into the life of the church and are distorting the true gospel with their own version of it. A version that relies upon and freely uses familiar Jewish teachings, beliefs, and practices (*all of which the readers of the sermon-letter would know, since they’re Hebrews*), but adds to these things new (*and false*) ideas, definitions, and forms. Things like: the greatness of angels (*especially as guardians and mediators*); salvation being determined not just by particular (*special or secret*) knowledge but even by particular foods or diets; upholding mystical teachings—not just about the spiritual world but also the physical; an emphasis on body-soul dualism, where the soul—as the perfect essence of who the person truly is—remains unaffected by bodily pleasures or sins, which fosters the practice of living however one pleases—no matter how immoral—and still being able to claim a pure, holy status; and if one happens to feel some sort of guilt, all that’s required is some routine, external ritual washing and then just carry on with pleasurable living. Thus, with this option, the writer is exhorting the believers not to be influenced or dragged away by such teaching, for such teaching is both not of God and powerless to save—despite what it might claim for or present itself to be.

Option two (*which, based on the details of the text, is the more likely one*) says: because of the persecution they believers are enduring—either locally or from the Empire (*or both, since this church was in or near the city of Rome*)—the writer is speaking out against the temptation for believers in Christ to return to their former beliefs, practices, and religious life in Judaism. In general, part of the draw could be tied to the comforts of familiarity, established routines, long-standing traditions, and even family history (*if not family connections*). But at a deeper level, it could be tied to things like: Judaism’s deep history; its authoritative sacred traditions; the grand and beautiful Temple in Jerusalem; an army of dedicated priests who daily serve God on the people’s behalf through offerings and sacrifices; an appointed High Priest who goes before God once a year on the people’s behalf to make intercession for sin; and of course, the array of joyous feasts, festivals, special days on the calendar, and dedications. All of this seems to stand far and above what’s found (*or seemingly not found*) in the new covenant church. That church appears to have no deep history (*it began c. 30 years prior*), no great/sacred traditions, no Temple for worship (*instead, they meet in random houses*), no altar, no daily and yearly sacrifices (*of the animal and crop varieties*), no official priesthood that serves on behalf of the people, and no regular and even annual celebrations. The new covenant church seems to lack everything Judaism has historically possessed and offered.

But there’s an additional difference that might be related to the draw to return. Judaism was tolerated and allowed (*and fair amount of*) freedom to operate as a particular religion within the Empire. But by the time of Nero, the new covenant church—the believers in Christ—were held to be not only other than historic Judaism but also worthy targets for Imperial persecution. Why? Because they proclaimed a message and life that Rome felt to be a threat to the deceitful rhetoric and immoral way of life championed by the Empire. So, and again, based on the text: this church of Hebrew believers, existing in Rome, appears to be considering walking away from their commitment to Christ (*because of their experiences with persecution and shame for that commitment and lifestyle*) and returning to a religious way of life that is familiar, long-standing, and tolerated, thus (*largely*) free from oppressive Imperial treatment. That being the case: with this option, the writer is exhorting the believers to stand firm in the face of all temptation and persecution instead of giving into the pressure and shame from a world that rejects the giver of true life and wants believers to walk away from God. And the writer is calling for the believers to resist being drawn away from their new life in Christ and returning to a religious way of life of outward displays of piety and ritualism, as though such things are the guaranteed path for true atonement and reconciliation with God.

accomplish what was truly necessary for atonement and reconciliation with God; only what God Himself did in the new covenant brought about that essential need. So, to return to what they once had is to surrender what they now have in Christ. A loss of the future for the past.

And that brings us to what the writer does with his sermon-letter. In the opening, he sets the stage for everything else that he's going to proclaim. A stage-setting that begins by revealing the life-altering truth that Jesus Christ—God incarnate—is superior to all things. Not just because He's God and thus the Creator and Sustainer of all things; not just because He's the final Word of revelation and thus the fulfiller of all things promised; but especially because He's the true Savior who's conquered sin and death. A conquering through His own sacrifice on the cross (*and resurrection from the grave*), which brought about the redemption of sinful humanity. A redemptive work He perfectly accomplished, never to be overturned, replaced, or repeated. Thus, the writer triumphantly declares: “so when He had accomplished cleansing for sins, ‘He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’” (Heb 1.3)—the first of many quotations from the OT throughout his sermon-letter.

Do not miss the fact that this declaration stresses the completed work of Christ as the Savior. Nothing more is needed. Do not miss the fact that this declaration reveals Christ and His saving work to be the fulfillment of God's promises in His revealed Word. No other authority needed to make the case. And certainly do not miss the fact that this declaration identifies Christ as the re-Creator of all things—especially those who belong to Him because of their faithful allegiance and transformation of heart and life. As Paul says: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come” (2 Cor 5.17). That exchanging of the old for the new is not only a central theme in the sermon-letter to the Hebrews, but also one that's applied to something more than one's identity and nature. To get back to the flow of thought: the writer's declaration of Christ's superiority reveals that He alone is the One who has perfectly, definitively, and finally accomplished what no one and nothing else in heaven and earth could ever achieve.

Christ is infinitely greater than all things, and all things must give way to His infinite greatness. And all of that wonderful, glorious truth being made clear in just the first three verses. But the writer knows more needs to be said and taught to provide his readers with the knowledge and assurance they need to remain faithful, and strengthened in their resolve. And so, the rest of the sermon-letter is him not just unpacking what it means for Christ to be superior to all things—an unpacking that runs from Heb 1.4 all the way down to 10.39. He also desires to show his readers (*and thus encourage them to realize*) how that wonderful, glorious truth is to have its life-altering result within them—an encouragement that runs from Heb 11.1 all the way to the end. As it relates to our passage for this morning: the writer, on the foundation of a multitude of texts from Scripture (*i.e., the OT*), specifically reveals Christ's superiority over the angels, Moses, Joshua, and the High Priest (*not to mention the entire priesthood*).

Moreover, Christ is shown to be superior to the Sabbath rest, the sacrificial system, and even the old covenant. A superiority over all of these things, not simply in a: “Here's another option that might be of use to you, but it's really up to you—there's no real right or wrong; all opinions on this are equally valid.” Instead, the superiority is one that says: all of those things were insufficient for and incapable of providing what is truly necessary for humanity's greatest need: salvation and rescue from the imprisoning darkness of sin along with its hope-killing

guilt and despair. It is only in Christ—the true bringer, establisher, and fulfiller of the God’s promises—that there is perfect atonement, redemption, and reconciliation. In Christ alone, there is freedom from sin and the removal of the mountainous weight of guilt and shame before God. Nothing and no one else—in heaven and on earth—could ever do what He has definitively accomplished. To believe and search otherwise, it both futile and destructive. It does not lead to life, for such searching leads one away from the only giver of life.³

4. STRENGTH IN CONNECTION

All of that stands behind and is foundational for our passage this morning in Heb 10.

a. Old vs. New Sacrifice (Heb 10.1–10)

The chapter begins with the declaration of the insufficiency of the old sacrifices and their need to give way to the greater that has come in Christ. Specifically, the old sacrifices (*and even the laws that govern them*) are only a mere shadow of something greater and are incapable of accomplishing what is truly necessary. In fact, in v.1 the writer uses the phrase οὐδέποτε δύναται, which carries the force of, “never able” or better: “never having the power to do so.” And in v.4 he uses the term, ἀδύνατος, which means: “not possible” or even “impossible.” And what is the impossible thing never able to be done? True forgiveness, atonement, salvation, and perfection. And the incessant and repetitious practice of re-presenting the same sacrifices does not alter that insufficiency. Such things will always fail. As the writer says: if it were otherwise, the sacrifices would have been successful the first time—one and done (see 10.2). But that’s not the case.

All the sacrifices do is serve as constant reminders that God’s people remain broken in sin, continue to carry the weight of their guilt, are always in need of true forgiveness, and exist in ongoing separation from their Creator. The system (*and even the laws that governs it*) does not change that reality. But as Paul declares in Rom 8: “**For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the Law may be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**” (Rom 8.3–4). This the writer to the Hebrews echoes when says in vv.5–10: this is why Christ came—to atone for sins and to give new life. And by doing so, He not only settles the sin and guilt problem, He also settles the separation problem.

This is clearly revealed in John’s Gospel: “**Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**” (Jn 1.29), and for those “**who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God**” (Jn 1.12). Notice: not one ounce of this declares Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth to offer the establishment of some earthly kingdom, where He would rule from some

³ That being the case, we’re not surprised to see in the sermon-letter the occasional warnings that must be spoken (cf. Heb 2.1–4; 3.7–4.13; 5.11–6.12; 10.19–39; and 12.14–29). Warnings about rejecting Christ and His salvation, which results in a falling away from the faith. Warnings about neglecting God’s revelation (i.e., His Word), which leads to closing the ears to His voice and hardening the heart to His truth. Warnings about failing to mature in faith and knowledge of God, which leaves believers in spiritual infancy, characterized by a want for only basics instead of deeper teachings, which serve as healthy food to bring about strength and growth. Warnings about cutting oneself off from life in Christ—either because of external pressure or temptation, or simply giving up on one’s commitment. Failing to realize that a branch cut off from the tree will not continue to grow and thrive. It will wither and die. (*Thus, any and all encouragement for believers to disconnect from Christ or deconstruct the faith is not concerned about sustaining the life Christ gives*). And that has ties with another warning—one that’s related to our passage: the warning about the temptation of the members of the body of Christ devaluing the need for (*and thus abandoning the practice of*) gathering together as the body of Christ for worship, teaching, and unified community.

earthly throne, as the earthly King over a particular people, and whose reign would be known and appreciated by other nations around Israel. Scripture reveals that Christ came for no other reason but to make complete atonement for and secure the complete redemption of sinful humanity, to recreate His people (*believing Jews and Gentiles*) in His image—defined by His holiness, righteousness, and truth; to purify their hearts and lives by the indwelling work and power of the Holy Spirit; and to make them legitimate heirs in God’s eternal household. That is what Christ came to do and that is what Christ has done through His perfecting, once-for-all sacrifice.

“Once-for-all” because it can only be (*and was only meant to be*) paid once, and because it’s the only one that settles the eternal debt. All being done to ensure the fulfillment of God’s true will. Not through repetitious sacrifices on an altar offered by imperfect mediators, which could never bring about true atonement, but through the perfect, one-time bodily sacrifice of the perfect mediator who guarantees perfect atonement. Thus, the writer can say in v.10: “*And by that will we have been sanctified [=made holy] through the offering of the body of Christ once for all.*” And because what He does is perfect, His once-for-all sacrificial-offering never needs to be replaced, supplemented, or re-presented. To think, believe, and behave otherwise is to call that which is infinitely sufficient and complete, and deficit and incomplete. And partially to make sure people don’t start thinking, believing, or practicing in those ways, but primarily to strengthen the case; the writer declares the old priesthood (*as a whole*), like the sacrificial system, to be insufficient and obsolete now because of Christ—never to be revived.

b. Old vs. New Priesthood (Heb 10.11–18)

That’s his case in vv.11–18, where he says: the old priesthood required a multitude of priests serving in the Temple daily, where they would carry out routine offerings and sacrifices—many of which were repetitious—on behalf of all the Jewish people. A mediating role understood not only religiously but also physically. If we recall the structuring of the Temple complex, things were divided according to race, gender, and religious status. The outermost and largest portion was the “Court of Gentiles,” which meant: this is as far as they could go. Getting closer to the Temple proper (*and thus the presence of God*)?...fat chance. Then there was the “Court of Women,” which similarly meant: ladies, this is as far as you can go. Then the “Court of Israel,” which was exclusive to Jewish males, and it was here that they would bring their offerings or sacrifices—either for themselves or their families (*sometimes both*).

But bringing the offering or sacrifice was the extent of their work. The men would give it to any one of the many priests serving (*twice a day, for a week*) in the reserved portion of the Temple: the “Court of Priests.” Here, the priest would make the offering or sacrifice on behalf of the individual or family. With animal offerings and/or sacrifices being made and burnt on an elevated altar—following the shedding of blood and marking the altar with the blood. Notice that the one who brings the offering is never truly given any assurance that the offering will be sufficient or that the priest won’t make a mistake, and thus invalidate the whole thing. The one who brought the offering or sacrifice remains at a distance from the one who makes it on his behalf. But also notice that all of this is still happening outside of the Temple proper. Even this army of priests are operating as mediators at a distance from the place of God’s presence.

Only one priest—chosen by random draw (*=casting of lots*)—would be appointed to enter the Temple proper, but only into the Holy Place. (*And only after he repented of his own sins,*

cleansed himself, and offered his own sacrifice). Once inside, he would conduct the incense offering, which was accompanied by a prayer of intercession—one that sought God’s blessing, His peace, and the arrival of His true Messiah, and therefore the rescue of God’s people from oppression.⁴ And beyond the veil at the far end of the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies—the place where God’s presence would appear on the Day of Atonement. Only the High Priest—after faithfully fulfilling a number of ceremonial and purification rituals—could enter the Holy of Holies. But only on that one day, once a year.

On this day, there would be an elaborate and precisely-kept service of prayers, confessions, washings, incense-burnings, sacrifices of various animals (*goats, bulls, lambs*), release of Azazel, sprinklings of blood and water, and changing-of-clothes (*4 four times total*)—all done on behalf of the sins of God’s people, who have “afflicted” their own souls in preparation for this day (*i.e., they focus on their guilt before God*), as they seek His forgiveness. Thus, the Day of Atonement is when God’s people are consciously aware of their own sinfulness and failings before a holy and righteous God, and they seek complete restoration and purification in the relationship they broke and defiled (*over the past year*). Just like the year before. Also notice: all of this is being done for the Jews only. None of what happens in the Temple is for the Gentiles—except for maybe the possible few unfair, vindictive prayers for their extinction.

And all of this is being carried out by only a select few (*the priests*) on a daily basis and only one (*the High Priest*) on a particular day of the year. But more to the point: all of this is taking place as an incessant practice without any sign of improvement or change, or any end in sight. Why? Two big related reasons: (1) human mediators—despite their rank or perceived holiness—will never be able to go before God on anyone’s behalf to plead for the complete forgiveness of sin and guilt. As Heb 1 suggests, not even angels can do this. And (2) the sacrifices of the priesthood—despite their repetitious nature and practice—will never be able to bring about complete salvation from sin and guilt. They might apply to outward misdeeds or corruptions, but they will never purify the heart and cleanse the soul. The very thing that God says must be purified and cleansed. And the very thing God says, in Jer 31 and Ezek 36, He will do in when He bring about the new covenant—the blessing of a new heart and spirit.

This is where the writer declares the superiority of Christ, for in the new covenant He fulfills, there is only One true High Priest, who makes one true sacrifice, which brings about the one truly needed result. It is in Christ alone—the One who does not need iterative ritual practices to obtain holiness and purity, but is Himself the embodiment of holiness and purity—that we have the perfect High Priest. He alone is the only One who can and has gone before God on our behalf to obtain forgiveness of sin and guilt. Moreover, it is in Christ alone—the One who does not need to be daily standing on His feet, making the same sacrifices over and over again, but never succeeding in taking away sins; in Christ, we have the One who made the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that completely atoned for sin and guilt; and because of His one-time perfecting work, He is able to sit “[down at the right hand of God](#)” (10.12).

A sitting down that does not mean He’s resting, has nothing else to do, or even that He will get up at a future time and oversee some other sacrificially atoning work in some rebuilt Temple. The writer already prepared us for this in Heb 9, where he said: “[But now Christ has come as the high priest of the good things to come. He has passed through the greater and](#)

⁴ Cf. E.E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1987), 68.

more perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, and He entered once for all into the most holy place not by the blood of goats and calves but by His own blood, and so He Himself secured eternal redemption” (9.11–12)—i.e., Christ Jesus paid the ransom price with His own blood, body, and life to secure our freedom from the prison of sin and all the darkness that covers our hearts in that isolating cell. Again, that price can only be (*and was only meant to be*) paid once, and it is the only one that can settle the eternal debt.

So, when the text says: all the priests have to continuously stand and offer their sacrifices on behalf of God’s people; it means: they continually stand and offer because their efforts will never succeed. Their work will never end, especially if they continue to serve in the light of the old ways of the old covenant. The covenant that keeps God’s law external to people’s hearts and lives and constantly reminds of them their sinfulness, their guilt before a holy and righteous God, and their broken relationships with God and with others. However, because Christ is our perfect High Priest—and the perfect fulfillment of that role—His atoning sacrifice is perfect and complete, and there is no need to perform that work ever again. There is no need for any other sacrifice—now or ever—for no other sacrifice (*attempted, resumed, or re-presented*) could ever compare to or achieve what only Christ has done on our behalf. To say or think otherwise is to reject the all-sufficiency of Christ’s atonement that Scripture declares.

Now, as we move out of this part of the chapter, let’s be sure not to miss the blessed result of Christ’s perfecting work on the cross and His perfecting mediation on the throne of heaven, where (*as v. 13 reveals*), He will remain until the day He returns in glory and brings about the perfect restoration of heaven and earth. As v. 14 declares: “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are made holy.” Who are those made holy? Believers. Those who faithfully belong to Christ and who are made one in Him—Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free. All made one because He tore down of the walls of divisions—not just between themselves but also the one between them and God. They are the ones who now “have [full, unhindered] access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2.18). They are the people of the new covenant, who have the perfect assurance of their salvation and new life. A perfect assurance that comes with the perfect gift and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

The One who is the seal and witness of their redemption. The One who is the promise of their identity. And the One who is the re-definer of their hearts and lives. The One who speaks perfect peace to a guilty conscience and who brings perfect holiness to a corrupt heart. All of this being the fulfillment of God’s own promise. Look at what the writer says and does: “And the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us, for after saying, ‘This the covenant that I will establish with them after these days, says the Lord. I will put my laws on their hearts and I will inscribe them on their minds,’ then He says, ‘Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no longer.’ Now, where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb 10.15–18). How can this be? Because God alone keeps His word, and He personally did what only He could do to bring about true forgiveness, atonement, salvation, and perfection. He came to us in Christ Jesus—the perfect sacrifice, Savior, redeemer, and true life-giver.

d. Bold Worship and Loving Fellowship (Heb 10.19–25)

And it’s from this glorious life-altering truth and God-established reality that the writer exhorts the believers to live faithful and steadfast—not only in their redemption but also in their unity. Their place with God and their place with each other. A faithful and steadfast way of life that is

characterized by confident (*or bold*) worship and loving fellowship in their shared identity and faith. Parts of their new life in Christ that were never meant to be separated or experienced in isolation. To belong to Christ is to be a member of His body. And as members of the church—i.e., God’s redeemed people—we are designed for and summoned to communal unity and worship. As one commentator put it: “**The New Testament lends no support to the idea of lone Christians.**”⁵ And the writer provides a helpful explanation for what that looks like and why—and he does so in the single, beautifully constructed sentence that is Heb 10.19–25. For this, we will do a “running commentary” to highlight its essential truths and application:

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, [*i.e., the members of the church*] since we have confidence [*or “boldness”*] to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,

This is not some good idea or wishful hope. This is an established truth—one that exists because of who Christ is and all that He has done. So, our confidence or boldness is not because of who we are or anything we’ve done. Instead, it comes from the assurance we have in what He’s done “by His blood” (*i.e., His sacrifice*); and it is only because of His work that we can “enter the sanctuary”—i.e., God’s presence—for communal worship.

by the fresh [*or “new”*] and living way that He inaugurated for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh,

This refers not only to the fulfillment of God’s promised new covenant, as foretold in Jer 31 and Ezek 36, but also to the tearing of the veil in the Temple proper. The removal of the separation between us and God’s holy presence, which took place while Christ was on the cross (Mt 27.50–51). A removal that proved His sacrifice to be everything that was necessary to completely atone for sins and completely open the way to God.

and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

This is another established truth—one that also exists because of who Christ is and all that He has done. As the great High Priest, we have the assurance that His redemptive work is perfectly completed and that He now presides over “the house of God.” Not the Temple in Jerusalem, for His final atoning work has rendered that Temple obsolete—never to be revived.⁶ Instead, the “house of God” that exists now is the new temple—i.e., the lives of those who belong to Him in faithful allegiance and obedience: Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free—all who have been made one in Christ, and who are “built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit” (Eph 2.22).

⁵ D. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (IVP, 2008), 218.

⁶ It’s worth mentioning that, despite some popular forms of end-times theologizing, the entire NT never once predicts, foretells, or promises the rebuilding of the Temple. In fact, when Jesus Himself speaks about the upcoming (utter) destruction of the Temple (cf. Mt 24.1–51; Mk 13.1–37; and esp. Lk 21.5–36), He never once says—let alone intimates—that it will ever be rebuilt. In fact, when we consider the reason for His entry into Jerusalem at the end of His earthly life and ministry (*i.e., to be the perfect, once-for-all atoning sacrifice that brings an end to the need for all sacrifice for sin and reconciliation*), we’re not surprised that He does not predict or promise any rebuilding of the Temple. He accomplishes in Himself what the Temple in Jerusalem could never do. (And we ought not lose sight of the fact that in Luke’s Gospel, the destruction of the Temple is an impending event—one that will be experienced by the disciples and apostles [cf. 21.20–24]—and one that will take place because the people rejected Christ as the true, promised Savior-King [cf. 19.44]). But what about Paul’s end-times reference to the “man of lawlessness,” who makes himself out to be God and “takes his seat in the temple of God” (2 Thess 2.4)? Doesn’t that suggest a rebuilt Temple at or near the end of time? The short answer is: no, it doesn’t. The slightly longer answer is: to say that Paul images a rebuilt Temple for God’s people at or near the end of time is to suggest that he accepts the need for a restoration of an old system of sacrifice and priesthood for atonement and reconciliation. But for Paul to suggest that is for him to undermine the very gospel he’s proclaimed his entire life and for which he given his life. In fact, it would be a message of atonement and reconciliation that would be worthy of his own curse (cf. Gal 1.6–9). Instead, it is better to understand Paul’s use of “temple” (ναός) in 2 Thess 2.4 in the way that he uses “temple” everywhere else: it is a reference to “the church”—i.e., God’s people (see 1 Cor 3.16, 17; 6.19; 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21).

let us draw near

This is the first of three exhortations for the people of God who have the confidence that comes from having a perfect, great High Priestly Savior. This call to draw near is for all who belong to God to come to Him for worship. A drawing near characterized...

with a sincere [or true] heart in the assurance that faith brings,

This means a heart that is authentic and not duplicitous or claimed in word only (cf. Isa 29.13; Mt 7.21–23). A heart that results from the assurance we have that our faith is true, our sins are forgiven, and our guilt is removed. A truth established because of the faithful knowledge and acceptance of who Christ truly is and all that He's done. Thus, it is a heart that knows and submits to the truth that God seeks true worshipers—those who will faithfully come to worship Him in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4.23)

because we have had our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.

This is a foundation stone for the assurance of faith, which has two parts. The sprinkling clean is not simply a ritual purifying of outward maladies or physical corruption. Rather, it's a purifying of the inner condition of the heart. Thus, the cause of moral corruption has been made clean and given new life, one defined by God's holiness. But that's necessarily tied to the second part: the washing of bodies with pure water. This refers to baptism, which, as Paul says in Gal 3.27, is when believers put on Christ and receive the new identity. An identity that, as Paul says in Rom 6.3–7, died to the old self and was raised to anew in Christ—the transformation of the self and the heart that defined the life of the self.

And let us hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess,

This is the second exhortation for the people of God. This cannot be reduced to holding on to a hope that we'll get out of this world before all hell breaks loose, and too-bad-so-sad for those left behind. The clear message of the NT is for believers not only to get ready for hardship in the world but also to be prepared to stand resolute for the gospel—especially in the midst of those who would love to silence the gospel and its heralds. So, this call to “hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess” is a summons to declare—at all times—the truth of the gospel and the new, other-than life it declares. More to the point, such is the calling for all who give themselves in faithful allegiance and obedience to Christ and who live as His disciples and disciple-makers. And do not miss the stress on the need for this being done together—as the body of Christ—where there is not only strength shared amongst each other but also strength from the One who promises to uphold His people.

for the one who made the promise is trustworthy.

This is a subtle—though some might say explicit—reference to Christ. But what was the promise? Where do you want to start? “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28.20). “In the world you have trouble and suffering, but take courage—I have conquered the world” (Jn 16.33). “On this rock I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Mt 16.18). Or in praying to God: “I'm not asking You to take them out of the world, but that You keep them safe from the evil one” (Jn 17.15). Or even the various calls in Revelation: “The one who conquers [i.e., doesn't quit or give up]...will in no way be harmed by the second death;...I will give him authority over the nations;...I will never erase his name from the book of life;...I will make [him] a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never depart from it” (2.11, 26; 3.5, 12). Take your pick, and there are plenty of others. The point is: when God says He'll do something, He does it. Proven by all that He's fulfilled in Christ. There is no one else who is that trustworthy, which means there is no one else who deserves our unwavering faith, allegiance, hope, and worship.

And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works,

This is the third exhortation for the people of God. The language here for “take thought” carries the idea of giving something deep consideration, which is necessary because of what needs to be considered: “[how to spur one another on to love and good works.](#)” This is clearly not imagining a personal spirituality or a “me church” setting. This is something that can only happen in community. And as we know from Scripture, “love” is not whatever we define it to be, and it is certainly not some warm and fuzzy feeling. Instead, “love” is God-defined and it’s a way of living as people who have been redefined by His redemptive love (cf. 1 Cor 13.4–8). And the pursuit of and living out that love will result in the second part: “good works,” with “good” coming from the term, καλός—i.e., that which is morally good and truly meaningful. That is the work we strive to do for others and it is the work we encourage others to do as well. Again, that’s best fulfilled in community.

[not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing,](#)

The term for “abandoning” also means to ditch something or to leave something helpless. That’s fairly strong imagery, especially when it’s applied to the “meetings”—ἐπισυναγωγή, which refers to an assembly meant for communal worship.⁷ And the phrase, “[in the habit of doing](#)” does not give the impression of every now and then, maybe accidentally slept in a couple of times, or even had a bad experience. Rather, it stresses a conscious decision to make it a pattern of absence—or a pattern of ditching. But what’s often overlooked (*or ignored*) is not only the long-term effects people will experience by cutting themselves off from the life of the church—i.e., the place of worship, instruction, fellowship, edification, love, and good works—but also the knock-on effects it has on the church’s witness and effectiveness to do meaningful ministry.

But more to the point, it’s often not realized that—biblically speaking—in “abandoning” the church they are cutting themselves off from the body of Christ. And not only is that never Christ’s intention, but it also results in being separated from those who love you and want to see you grow and thrive in Christ. It’s being separated from those who desire to do life with you, to celebrate successes with you, to mourn losses with you, to share the load with you, to serve others alongside you, to have your back when you need it most, and to stand out front to protect you. It’s being separated from those who do not ever want you to be or feel alone in this world—especially a world that longs to get believers alone and away from God and His people. So any and all rhetoric from outside of the church that church can be done in isolation (*if it’s even done at all*) is not offering a promised better and more fulfilling way for doing life. Instead, it’s offering a way that guarantees being cut off from not only the strength to be had in the community of believers but also the One who is the only way, truth, and giver of life.

[but encouraging each other, and even more so because you see the day drawing near.”](#)

To be clear: “encourage” does not simply mean be nice and say something positive. The term here is παρακαλέω (the verb form of παράκλησις, “*exhort*”), and παρακαλέω carries the idea of coming alongside as an advocate and comforter. Thus, we’re dealing with something much deeper and far more meaningful than good vibes. And this call to be “encouraging” completes the charge about being deeply thoughtful on how to spur one

⁷ It’s worth pointing out that the only other time that ἐπισυναγωγή appears in the NT is 2 Thess 2.1–2: “[Now regarding the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered \[ἐπισυναγωγῆς\] to be with Him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to be easily shaken from your composure or disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.](#)” The number of thematic connections between that passage and Heb 10.25 makes for a good study.

another on to love and good works, and to ensure the unity of the body of Christ. Such things happen best in community—the community that has been unified in Christ, devoted to drawing near, as one body, to God for worship. And when we draw near to God for worship, we discover our drawing near to each other. And in drawing near to each other, we can—with one heart and voice—celebrate all of who Christ is, all that He has done, all that He continues to do in and through His church, and all that is yet to come from Him—i.e., the hope of His return in glory, where all evil is punished and all of creation is restored, with the perfect union of heaven and earth, and the everlasting kingdom of peace, filled with the songs of praise and triumph.

That larger perspective of reality is the God-given encouragement we need individually and must share corporately as we seek to live faithfully as God's people in this world. An encouragement that reminds us: because of what He has perfectly done for us, we belong to Christ. A belonging that declares we are forgiven, we are freed from guilt, we are brought near to God, we are made new and holy, and we are united as one people in One name to One Savior, Lord and King. And with this belonging, there is the knowledge that He will do life with us, celebrate successes, mourn losses, share the load (especially the ones we could never bear on our own), serve alongside, have our backs when we need it, and He will certainly stand out front to protect us. All backed by the assurance that He will never leave us or forsake us.

And with that abiding presence, He proves Himself to be our perfect provider and sustainer—the One who unfailingly gives each one of us and all of us His strength to stand firm together in the face of dark, challenging, trying, and even oppressive times. And from that we can say—with one heart and one voice: we belong to Christ, in whom there is perfect forgiveness, atonement, redemption, new life, new meaning, and new hope; and we will—as one people—stand firm, strong, and resolute, and we will not compromise and walk away from the One who did not walk away from us. Instead, we unwaveringly stand together with the One who came to us in our absolute weakness and with absolute strength broke the chains of sin, overcame the darkness of evil, defeated the power of death, and gave us true freedom, glory, and life.