

Ancient Truth: General Letters

By Ed Hurst

Print on Demand Edition (revised)

Copyright 2012, 2021 by Ed Hurst

Copyright notice: People of honor need no copyright laws; they are only too happy to give credit where credit is due. Others will ignore copyright laws whenever they please. If you are of the latter, please note what Moses said about dishonorable behavior – “be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23)

Permission is granted to copy, reproduce and distribute for non-commercial reasons, provided the book remains in its original form.

Introduction to the General Letters

Hebrews

James

1 Peter

2 Peter

1 John

2 & 3 John

Jude

The General Letters could also be called the Jewish Christian letters. That is, they serve to correct the particular problems of First Century Jews seeking the path of Christ. While Paul addressed such things in passing, his letters primarily discussed matters pertaining to his apostleship to Gentiles. Yet, in the process of helping Jewish Christians, the various authors masterfully bridge the gap between the Old and New Covenants in ways that still speak powerfully to us today.

Hebrews

The book is commonly called "The Letter to the Hebrews." While it may have been delivered to its intended audience as a letter, its format is more of a scholarly treatise. Only the final chapter contains material typical of letters. Further, it assumed a rabbinical cast of mind. While fully committed to Christ, it was a mind thoroughly Alexandrian in training. The author appears to have been a priest or Levite, trained in the highest standard of Alexandrian Greek and quoting from the Septuagint. Thus, his audience would appear to be rather the same sort of people.

We can discern that these people were a Hellenistic Jewish community in or near Rome. Persecution has struck hard and they have stopped their regular community worship. They are contemplating a return to Judaism, in part simply to stop their suffering. The writing addresses the more educated leadership of these people, former rabbis in Judaism. The whole book is a blunt statement that the Covenant of Moses died on the Cross.

The hints within the text suggest a time just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Some of the arguments offered in this treatise would require a significant change if the Temple were no longer standing. However, it is quite likely they were converted under Paul's teaching. It's unlikely they would have embraced Christ so easily unless their intellectual objections were answered by someone who knew those objections beforehand, knew their flaws and could offer a high level of reasoned response. This narrows the time frame to some point after 64 AD, when it appears Paul finally visited Rome at the expense of the imperial government as a prisoner. This timing coincides with a known period of imperial persecution, climaxed in the march of troops into the Herodian lands in 68 AD.

It is in this book that we receive details that indicate a large oral body of scholarly understanding of details from the Old Testament, but not recorded there. This is the only place where so much is made of Melchizedek, for example. While Paul does offer glimpses of this material in his letters, the writer of Hebrews dumps large amounts of it. Thus, while the treatise is thoroughly Hellenist of the Alexandrian flavor, it is distinctly Old Testament Hebrew in content and reference.

Hebrews 1

Immediately our writer shows us the Hebrew standard for handling the Old Testament text. Departing from the Hellenistic methods of slavish textual analysis, but not yet as rootless as the Alexandrian adaptation, this is a peculiarly Hebrew way of quoting from the Old Testament, sometimes blending into the quote a free ranging commentary. This is more than just *targum*, a restatement in modern terms, but quotation with an application the original author may not have intended. Thus, even when his use seems to us unjustified by the context from which it was taken, employing too much of a poetic license, we must accept this as proper and correct because this book was regarded in its own time as God-breathed. That is, we realize the author read his Old Testament with a truly inspired understanding and his adaptations were an example of that deeper understanding that was not bound by mere words, but a fuller grasp of the greater revelation of God as a Person. There is no profligate abuse of the Old Testament text; most New Testament quotations of the Old are fairly easy to explain. Yet, we do find occasionally a poetic license that makes us uncomfortable until we grasp revelation from the Hebrew mindset. The same God who inspired the first writer inspired the second. While we must be hesitant in copying such behavior, we are forced to conclude the message is more important than the means for conveying it.

God used all means to reveal Himself. That revelation came bit by bit, like the twinkling of the stars in the sky. He offered a glimpse here, a manifestation there, a word, a dream, a vision, an angel, an event, etc. God has never bound Himself to any one particular method, but held all humanity accountable to even the most incomprehensible messages. However, to inaugurate the much-prophesied "Last Days," God sent a personal representation of Himself. Insofar as we are ever going to understand Jehovah, we must embrace His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Jewish people of the First Century, suffering under a highly corrupted understanding of their Bible, came dangerously close to worshiping angels. Given that high reverence, our writer bluntly states that Jesus was most certainly above those angels. He does so first by referencing material familiar to his audience. In Psalm 2, we have a song celebrating the royal coronation, perhaps used annually during the Monarchy Period. The Psalmist aims to show how the King of Israel is the chosen of God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. To resist this king is suicide, because no nation of men holds that level of interest for Jehovah. Taking off on the hyperbole of that psalm, our writer points out Jesus as the prophesied heir of David, who was most literally The Son of God. In similar fashion, with Solomon being "adopted" as a son of

God, Jesus inherited sonship literally by virtue of His divine birth. The caveat in the rest of that verse (2 Samuel 7:14) about any possible iniquity does not apply to Christ. Arguing from silence, the writer mentions that not a single hint of such elevation was offered to any angel, something conspicuous by its absence.

Next, we have a quote from the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43). This passage is a prophecy that sums up the history of Israel nicely. In the end, they face the wrath of God for their idolatry, but it brings a blessing to all nations. In the final verse of that song, our writer quotes from the Septuagint version, the version most familiar to his Hellenized readers. He doesn't bother with whether it's precisely faithful to the original text; he accepts the inserted phrase that many regard as spurious simply because it is good theology. A similar sentiment is found in Psalm 97:7, though some translations choose to render the ambiguous *elohim* as "gods" rather than "angels." Either way, it's still good theology. There is not a being in existence throughout all Creation exempt from the command to worship the Son of God as the fullest expression of God Himself. Given the angels are created beings, they must also fall at His feet. Using the materials that he knows the Hellenized Jews would accept, our author gets his point across: By comparison to the Heavenly Heir of all things, the angels with their abilities to alter the very physical reality at the whim of God are mere messenger boys (Psalm 104:4).

Psalm 45 is rooted in a royal wedding, probably of David or Solomon. The Sons of Korah came back from that celebration filled with joy and wrote this song to mark the spiritual insights revealed to them during the ceremony. While it would be hard to know just what sort of Messianic theology was held during the United Monarchy, scholars are convinced that this psalm is about the Messiah. Clearly, the psalmist blurs the line between addressing his king and his God. The writer of Hebrews justly quotes this as a Messianic prophecy. The spiritual truth behind the meaning of the symbols of office and the ritual anointing are obvious.

The 102nd Psalm has inspired several pieces of modern music. This is called a "plaintive psalm," a cry to God for help, with flashes of faith and trust in His Eternity. This is directly addressed to Jehovah and is not viewed as specifically Messianic. Still, our writer correctly pulls it in to celebrate the understanding clearly enunciated by John at the opening of his Gospel. Jesus was the agent of Creation; He was there from the start. When the created universe has served its purpose and has been put away, Jesus will still be there.

In contrast to this vision of an Eternal Son, our writer notes that nothing like this was said of angels. Unlike them, the Son was told in a quote from Psalm 110 that He should take a seat at the Father's right hand until all things are accomplished. Jesus quoted this passage as applying to Himself, using it as a way to demonstrate the way Hebrew paradox works as a contrast to the Pharisees' shallow literalism. Obviously, David wrote this prophetically, somehow glimpsing a vision of The End.

Again, the writer notes that angels exist merely to support the mission of those serving this great God. Those of us who embrace the Son as our Savior and Lord inherit Eternity. In this, God uses the angels as messengers and runners from His Heavenly Courts. They do for us

things not within human power. They do it because we serve Him.

Hebrews 2

According to Paul (Galatians 3:19) and Stephen (Acts 7:53), it is fair to say that the hand of angels delivered the Law of Moses. By no means did this weaken its authority as God's revelation. Failure to obey brought the wrath of God by the hands of the same angels. Yet, the Law had distinct limitations, for it only applied to things of this earth. It brought direct blessings only in this world and applied only to one nation in this world. Jesus Christ brought an end to that covenant. He was the very person and character of God, bringing an eternal covenant, which applies to all mankind throughout history. His teaching received the same miraculous support as that of Moses, but with the added power and presence of His own Spirit, rather than mere angels. Since it is so much a higher covenant and truth, how can we afford to let it slip away?

Calling attention to a Jewish Messianic phrase – “the world to come” (*olam habba*) – our writer points out that the angels are not masters of the Kingdom of Heaven. David in Psalm 8:4-6 refers to the proper view of mankind as fallen, sinful and wretched. In this context, the phrase “son of man” is not a Messianic title, but would be taken by Jews as a reference to the first Adam as representative of all humanity. This reminds us that, in Hebrew writing, context is everything. As fallen creatures, why does God even bother with us, since we trashed His Creation? He placed us at the head of this world, subjected all things to our mastery, even commanding angels. Yet clearly, we have so corrupted His image of us that we can barely make our way through this life. It now appears that we aren't masters of anything and certainly not of angels. Into this very fallen existence came Jesus, who walked as a mere man, far below His rightful place. On behalf of us all, He took from us and for us the just sentence of death. This made Him rightfully Master of All Things in Heaven and Earth.

He translated death into Life. By absorbing the penalty for sin, He makes death a rite of passage into the Kingdom, rather than the first step to damnation. He accepts our death, and trades it for His death; He takes our old life and gives us His New Life. As the very living expression of God's authority and nature, the Agent of Creation, His death fulfilled all requirements to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven. As our Commander, He calls us His brothers.

Rightly do we understand Psalm 22 as a prophecy of the Messiah. It dramatically recounts the experience of Jesus, beginning with the crucifixion, words which Jesus quoted from the Cross. We can almost see Him rising from the grave, as He declares His victory in His Father's response to that sacrifice. He has gained the authority to remake those His Father called into His new children. On our behalf, He declares His trust in the Father's will, with a quote found all over the Old Testament. Just as Isaiah stood before God faithful, with his two children bearing prophetic names regarding God's deliverance, Jesus stands before His Father having faithfully carried out the Word, in the company of those changed by that Word, as granted by the Father's grace.

By His willingness to wear human flesh and bear our sins, Jesus was given power to render Satan harmless. He took from Satan the only weapon he had. Since death is no longer the end, those who follow Christ are truly free to serve without restraint. No earthly persecution, not even the grave, can threaten His brothers and sisters. He did not come as an angel, but as a Hebrew, bloodline of Abraham. To Israel, He came as an Israelite, able to sympathize with their condition. He was the perfect High Priest who covered the sins of all, not with some sacrifice of another, but of Himself. He passed through all the same temptations and intimately understands what we face.

Thus, He was fully aware of all that the Hebrews were facing in Rome. Their situation was not unique, their sorrows not greater than those Christ faced. He gave Himself over to far worse and came through the victor, offering that same victory to the Hebrew readers of this book.

Hebrews 3

The Exodus was the very foundation, the defining event of Israel. If the Exodus was a myth, so was Israel as a nation. While they pointed with some smugness to their specialness before the Lord some fourteen centuries later, they paid only lip service to the duty of expressing contrition for the nation flinging challenge after challenge into God's face. The story of the Exodus is the sad tale of whining and bickering slaves who preferred their slavery to the freedom and identity as God's Own People. The entire Exodus generation remained unfit for the Promised Land, conditioned as they were to bondage.

Our writer calls this to mind, charging that his readers are the same sort of people. When Christ came to fulfill the promises of Exodus, how very many of God's Own People rejected Him! The Roman Jews were among those called into the Kingdom of Heaven, a far higher calling than the Kingdom of Israel. Christ, God Himself, called them. If Moses can be held up as the model of faithfulness, who was but a servant in the household of God, how much more Christ the Son? Christ formed a household as His inheritance; Christ built it.

And it was Christ who faithfully discharged all the duties of His Sonship. If He owned it all, He was the very definition of faithfulness. The first household was just an earthly temple. When its purpose was fulfilled in His death on the Cross, it was torn down. From the rubble were found a few stones still of use to God. He chose from among the Jews, but also from the rest of humanity, stones suitable for His house. He built up His household by His teaching and power, the means of trying the stones. These Roman Jews were a part of those passing the test. How then could they return to a house that no longer stands, except in the fallen imagination of mere men? Hold fast the confession of your faith in Christ! It is the only thing that is real.

The writer quotes Psalm 95:7-11. There David recalls testing of the Lord by Israel at *Meribah* (Rebellion) and *Massah* (Trial) in Exodus 17:2-7. This was rather early in the journey up from slavery, during the first shock of introduction to desert nomad living. Had they but called out to God in faith, the whole scene would have been remembered as a triumph. Instead, they gave Moses much grief and God took it personally. For the next forty years, Jehovah faithfully stood

by them, led them and took care of their every need. Every step of the way, they whined and attacked God's chosen servant. For the Roman Jews, Jesus was the new Servant, the actual Son of God. This Roman persecution was just the spiritual nomad boot camp. Bitterly wishing they had not come on this spiritual journey was to wish for slavery, granting Satan the victory. It was treason to side with the enemy.

As the Lord swore in His just wrath that the Exodus generation would die in the wilderness, so the Roman Jewish Christians risked losing all hope of finding the true Promised Land of Heaven. Those without Heaven in their souls cannot enter Heaven when they die. Allowing doubts to rise about whether serving Christ was worth it was silly. The word "today" is but the moment of testing and is quickly past. Today we should all face testing with joy and confidence. Were these readers among those who would die in the spiritual wilderness today? Or were they among those who clung to the revelation of Christ and would pass into the Promised Land to see God's face?

No one can do it for you. God will carry you through, but you must accept His power to commit yourself to His plans. They won't be like your plans, no more than the Exodus brought Israel to a place like Egypt. Their souls were at home in the swampy river bottom of slavery, not out in the rocky heights of freedom in Christ. All you have to do is hang onto Him.

Hebrews 4

To most of us in the Western world, this chapter sounds almost like self-contradiction. It's hard to put Hebrew thoughts into Greek language and I suspect it's a little tough for Alexandrian minds to grasp these spiritual things. While a one-to-one allegory is just fine for them, a spiritual parable declaring several things at once on different levels was a factor in the Jewish Christians at Rome struggling to stay oriented on Christ. However, our writer is confident he can draw them up to a higher spiritual grasp. It remains for us to untangle something that is a Hebrew thought written in a Greek language and translated into English.

On the seventh day of Creation, the Word says Our Lord rested. The word used for "rest" is essentially the word "Sabbath" itself. While the root meaning is rather broad, the context would connote celebration of a completed task. It is conceptually related to the Hebrew word usually translated as "peace" – *shalom*. This is more than mere tranquility, but tranquility of heart and soul resulting from having prospered, found plenty, and protected from threats. It was this sense of rest that David referred to in the 95th Psalm, quoting from Moses in Exodus 17.

On the one level, the Covenant of the Law promised a worldly peace, a material health and wealth. This was a law of mere behavior bringing promise of what mere behavior can purchase: worldly success. The Law was binding on this one nation, in this one place, during that one period. Obviously, they failed to achieve even that little bit of worldly rest. Joshua performed his duty rooting out all the heathen worship centers in the land. The sources of Canaanite cultural and religious corruption were gone. In due time, by adhering to the Law, Israel would easily slaughter or drive out the remaining occupants. They did not adhere to the Law, nor did

they finish off the Canaanites. Instead, they compromised militarily and ritually. They were unfaithful to their part of the Covenant of Moses.

The Nation of Israel had one “gospel” of Law. It was indeed very good news that God offered everything every other nation of men desired. He gave them far more of it than they deserved. They lacked what little commitment was required for even that worldly success. They never quite rested. Just as the first generation died in the wilderness, rejecting their gospel, so the Nation of Israel died in this fallen world because they rejected the gospel of the Messiah. It was theirs first. Just as Joshua and Caleb survived the change, so some Jews did indeed pass into the Spiritual Kingdom. It would be silly to attempt wringing from God’s truth a mathematical precision, since He Himself does not require it back from us. We cannot stretch the term “that generation” to mean every breathing human soul. Some met God’s demands for entering the Promised Land; some also entered the Kingdom of Heaven. There were always a few who did indeed embrace the gospel of their time.

Thus, the door of Heaven remains open to Jews, but only if they come through Christ. There does indeed remain that elusive rest for the soul, that Sabbath of the spirit. Fear of persecution is not a part of the faith that seizes the gospel granting us victory. This is the same promise given to Abraham, whose covenant remained in effect throughout the period of the Law of Moses. The Law gave worldly blessings, but eternal life was always in the Covenant of Abraham throughout the life of the Nation of Israel. The Covenant of Abraham was actually more about dying to the old ways and embracing the sacrifices of the new. One who clings to that fundamental demand could always find eternal salvation throughout the Old Testament. Christ in one sense merely renewed Abraham’s Covenant of personal faith, placed it in a new context and broadcasted it to all humanity. So, the path to Moses was closed at the Cross. Whatever could have been had under Joshua was merely an earthly symbol of what really mattered. We must not miss the play on words, as the names “Joshua” and “Jesus” are but two spellings of the same name. To join in that rest of God’s Eternal Sabbath requires doing the works of God, a conquest of this life, a spiritual labor with a spiritual reward.

It is a rare body of Christ that does not teach memorizing the verse regarding the Word as a sword. This is quintessential Hebrew logic, comparing an earthly thing, along with the full implication of what that thing does, to a spiritual concept. In the Kingdom of Heaven, the one weapon of conquest over the flesh is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. That Living Word is able to clarify with savage efficiency what is godly and what is not, what must be retained and what must be cut away. We end this life so the next may be born in us. With such piercing glare as the pure light of truth slashing through our souls, can we doubt that He knows us better than we ever could ourselves? No motive escapes His notice. The obvious implication relates to the previous verses: How do you expect to pass back into the Eden of Rest if you do not fall under the Flaming Sword that guards the way (Genesis 3:24)?

Again, the writer flatly tells his Jewish readers in Rome that the Mosaic path is closed. The only High Priest God recognizes is there with Him in Heaven. His Law is neither the precise and

pedantic silliness of the Talmud, nor even the simpler Law of Moses. Who hadn't seen how strict Pharisaical obedience could be paired with moral depravity? Our Savior is the High Priest who reads not mere conduct, but our very souls and judges the truth with mercy. Having been in our place, He knows intimately what we suffer here. Unlike the priests in earthly Zion, His Temple is in God's very presence, as very God Himself. Unlike priests whose moral imperfections did not disqualify them, but ritual impurities did, our High Priest in Heaven is sinless in His very being. He has conquered this fallen life in person and in His Person. Let us hold fast to Him; let us keep that link alive. As His own, we can boldly come before God Almighty, whose purity sees the very depth of our sins, but whose Son stands beside us to cover those sins. When things get rough on this earth, we can know that it is for our good and He will grant us His strength to stand the sorrow and misery.

Hebrews 5

Our writer closes the door back into the Law a little tighter by showing that there is but one High Priest whom God will accept. That one does not stand in Herod's Temple. Further, he warns that the spiritual reality of things has eluded them completely, because they have refused to grow beyond their poor Hellenized Judaism.

While there may be some debate about the absolute accuracy of it, the various rabbinical colleges all had a copy of the roll of High Priests, going all the way back to Aaron. Each man's name, lineage and some words about his service, were included in this roll. Some of them were quite famous, offering exemplary service during their term of office. Some were equally infamous for their failures.

The office of High Priest is conceptually fuzzy in our minds. In standard Hebrew fashion, the logic is symbolic, not concrete, not merely a matter of metaphor or allegory. Spiritual truth is hardly explained, only exemplified within a context. The calling of the High Priest was at the behest of God. He set forth the original calling of Aaron and commanded how this office would be carried on by future generations. Obviously no single man in this fallen world could live forever, so the office had to pass from one man to the next. There must always be a man in the office for as long as the Covenant of the Law stood.

Because these were humans, chosen from among the Nation of Israel, they could empathize with the human failings that bound Israelis in their sins. He could serve in his representative office before God Almighty because he was called to it by God, but did so with a human heart no less fallen than those whose offerings and burdens he presented. He had to offer covering sacrifices for his own sins before attempting to offer them for others. Were he not called into the divine Presence by God, He would be stricken dead immediately. Often enough, the sins of the nation caused this anyway. At this, it was not literally God's presence, but merely an earthly representation of such a presence. It was an earthly model of God's throne room in Heaven. Yet, for the sake of sufficient sin, the High Priest could well expire on the Day of Atonement when he carried the blood sacrifice into that little room with the wooden box coated with gold leaf

and mythical sculptures. He was just a man representing other men to a God no man could see.

Again, this whole thing was by God's command. All the desire in the world could not make a man High Priest. It was an ironclad birthright issue. By Hebrew logic, this took away any pride a man might have, for what did he do to merit such an office? It was not possible to wear the vestments by merit, but by grace alone, by God's command. So it was with Christ. He came to Israel by God's command. Further, He came not merely as one of the Jews, but as the Son of God who commanded. Our writer quotes again the coronation song, Psalm 2, which bears a Messianic truth. If the Davidic king could be called a son of God, how much more so the Messiah Himself, the one who was both anchor and end of the House of David?

Many of the mystical connotations of David's reign are tied up in the Messiah. The writer also quotes Psalm 110. We are reminded that David was permitted to touch the Ark of the Covenant. While under the covenant for which that Ark existed, it was forbidden. He was permitted because he somehow had seized upon the faith and covenant that came much earlier and still stood. The Covenant of Abraham, which included Melchizedek, both as men of faith who had fully committed their lives to Jehovah, was of a much higher order than the Law. We note that the Law was merely an outward expression of what holiness would be under strictly circumscribed limits: that people, that land and that time. It was not the ultimate revelation of holiness, but was actually a poor reflection of it. While very much binding on Israel as a nation, it could never save souls. That was a matter of faith, of commitment as a gift of grace. When David embraced that level of faith, the Law was fulfilled. Moreover, he could approach the Ark directly, the symbolic Throne of Jehovah, as if he were a High Priest of some other order. That was the prior order of Melchizedek, the order of Abrahamic faith.

Thus, in that Psalm, David reveals an oracle of God, which named him as a High Priest of that other, older order. This is why the Psalms declared God's command that the whole world should bow before His King on earth. Not as King of Israel, though the image was dressed in that robe, but as King of Faith, the faith Israel was meant to have, but rejected. Still, that faith was at work and it wrought the Messiah. These were prophecies of the Coming One who would be God's own Son and High Priest of Faith. This was Christ Jesus.

While on the earth as a man, this Jesus was a vastly superior High Priest, for His offering never failed. When He stood before the Throne of God, He was there as Son. His appeals for mercy were surely granted, for God was granting them to Himself. Waxing yet more lyrical, the writer offers an old play on words in Greek. It was a common game to combine two similar sounding words in Greek or Latin as a phrase that encouraged some virtue, or made some pithy statement. Here he uses *emathan* and *epathen* – "learning is suffering." Jesus didn't learn how to obey; obedience to God was His very nature. Rather, He learned as a man that obedience was suffering, a very Hebrew concept. To gain was to grow, to be changed, to cut off things of the past and leave behind the comfort of the womb. In short, the trauma of birth itself was hidden in learning by experience. What a man hears, he knows. What he sees, he understands. What he experiences, he is.

Summing all this up with His life, pulling together all the unfinished threads of human history and God's promises, God redeemed all mankind. With Jesus as High Priest in Heaven, any other man claiming that role is a blasphemer. The standing High Priest so-called in Herod's Temple at that moment was a fake. For this Hebrew audience in Rome, our writer warns there is no place to go if they leave Jesus.

On the cusp of further explaining the image of Melchizedek, the author stops. He pulls his readers up short in their headlong rush back to the comforts of a familiar Judaism. He's wary of explaining because his readers are weary of hearing. After this many years of walking in Christ and reclaiming their true Hebrew identity, they still remained mere Jews of that latter day corrupt Judaism. They had not traveled back into the land of parabolic truth, of symbolic logic, of things that cannot be *taught*, but only *caught* by the spirit enlightened in the Spirit of God. They were sucklings, tender and fat of souls. No wonder persecution was so hard on them. What infant is ready to face hardship? These readers were unable to sift the truth from the mystical viewpoint of the old Hebrew mind. They were still hardly grasping concrete toys of mere human logic with clumsy little hands. They knew the nursing of simple ideas, but the meat of truth was not something they recognized as food.

Hebrews 6

Jesus came to the Nation of Israel, such as it was in His day, and preached, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Whatever it was Israel was doing, they needed to repent. He seemed particularly concerned with the sins of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. We have ample evidence of what He found at fault in them. Much of Jesus' criticism can be summed up as pressing Israel to return to their Hebrew Mystical roots, because so very much of Israel's sin was the result of leaving those roots. The shallow, soulless ritualism of the Jewish leaders Christ confronted was a direct result of embracing Hellenism with its disregard for a higher realm of truth. Hellenism asserted that there was nothing beyond intellectual ideals. Mechanical ritual observance was a direct result of such thinking. This was foreign to the fundamental assumptions of the Scripture. Jesus was calling the people back to those Hebrew Mystical assumptions, to turn away from this world and the limits of mere human logic. Higher Truth is not an objective body of understanding, but a Person.

Thus, our writer calls for his Jewish readers in Rome to realize just how far they were supposed to have come. Did they, like Peter walking on water, find the place of Christ so utterly foreign that they could not lay hold of Him? Had they not already laid the ground of finding in Christ the ultimate higher truth of which the rituals and teaching of Moses were but a mere symbol? Seize this and move on! It's no longer up for debate and rehashing to the nth degree, as rabbis so loved to do. Jesus was the clarification of all things; follow Him into a higher understanding where God is to be found.

It is the fundamental nature of Christians to grow, to keep seeking the next level of faith and understanding. If it is possible for a soul to have sampled the realm of the Holy Spirit, that

mystical, unspeakable glory of God's own very Presence and power, and then turn back to that false understanding of Moses, there is no hope. Indeed, it is not possible; but if it were, such a soul might as well die, for Christ cannot save him yet again. The anchor for the change in your nature in Christ is in Heaven, in God Himself. The Son died for sins once for all; do you intend to crucify Him again? If you can renounce Him after getting to know Him, you bear even more guilt than all the Jews who never embraced Him in the first place. In modern parlance, it is worse than a plot of ground so infertile that it can serve only as a parking lot. No, this is ground that perverts good seeds into weeds.

As harsh as these words may be, our writer's faith realizes that anyone who could leave Christ never knew Him. Anyone capable of embracing His Spirit of sacrifice surely has given the only true evidence of redemption. Where this Spirit is born, we expect in due time to see diligence in making Him known. We operate from the investment that others in Christ have borne before us, tossing their worldly existence aside as excess baggage.

As it is today, so it was in ancient times: Some court cases came before a judge with insufficient evidence. Lacking a conclusion, the cloud of suspicion remained and could hinder normal life. Settling the issue to allow the suspect complete freedom often required submitting a bond of some value, but that symbolized laying one's reputation and social privileges on the line. Regardless of how great the man may be, he would swear an oath in the name of someone greater, someone who could and would back him up if the judge bothered to ask. Sometimes a dispute over terms of an agreement or alliance would come before a judge and it was handled similar to a question of whether the parties were trustworthy. In offering a covenant to Abraham, whom the Jews claimed often as their father, God bound Himself by an oath on Himself, since there was no greater power as guarantor.

The whole point behind such covenants and oaths was to provide a reasonable assurance, to compel one or both parties to go forward under the assumption that this agreement or settlement was based in reality. Stop doubting, stop investing resources in a backup plan; just go and do. They recognized a moral certitude standing above perception and feelings. Eastern cultures did not struggle with the concept that you could embrace a personal commitment with your whole heart, to strive in the name of your god to ignore feelings of doubt. A man could commit to friendship and support based on his internal moral compass, not whether the other person had proven himself worthy by our modern standards. It was this that was laid upon Abraham, for it was his own God who backed up the warrant. Can the Creator of all things fail?

Abraham found that God did not fail, for the writer quotes from the passage in Genesis 22, where Abraham prepared to offer up Isaac on Mount Moriah, the same ground upon which stood Herod's Temple. On this ground, God promised anew two things. He would speak well of Abraham; when God says good things about you, all nature must respond accordingly. He would also insure that Abraham had more descendants than anyone could count. That's because the Covenant of Abraham was extended by Christ, renewed in Him, the original covenant of individual faith and redemption.

It was never intended as a promise of literal genetic descent, but of a spiritual inheritance. Abraham left behind everything that mattered to a man in his world and traded it for a future of which he knew nothing. He offered his only chance at having a son, a literal descent to carry his name. Jehovah Jireh (God Our Provider) took care of all his needs. Those who embrace faith in Christ are children of Abraham, a number far greater and broader than mere DNA could mark. Those of us turning to Christ will find the spiritual riches of the Kingdom more than compensate for the loss of paltry worldly possessions. We find the power of Life in the Holy Spirit more than adequately replaces this miserable existence in a fallen world.

Jesus took up the vestments of that former ancient Covenant of Faith, a covenant that stood before, during and after the Covenant of Law, never abrogated, being the precise fulfillment of the Promise of Abraham. Mount Moriah was just a place; what happened there is what mattered. The Temple standing at that time on Mount Moriah was just a building, a poor shadow of God's Court in Heaven. The veil in Herod's Temple was torn when Christ cried out, "It is finished!" The Son of God, as both man and God, has breached forever the veil that hides God Himself from those in the flesh. He is the final representative of that ancient covenant of which Melchizedek was a symbol. Embrace the mystical truth of God's revelation, His Son.

Hebrews 7

While we must acknowledge that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a new thing on this earth, we make a grave mistake if we assume faith and grace were not in operation before Christ. The Jews assumed the Covenant of Abraham was fulfilled in Moses. It was not. Moses was on a wholly different level, an earthly symbol of a higher reality, with earthly requirements and earthly promises and blessings. Those things have their place, but they are mere symbols of a deeper reality. Since before Abraham, people gained right standing with God neither by rituals nor behavior at large, for all failed at those things. Rather, they stood before God on the basis of faith embracing His grace.

So, what was this Priestly Order of Melchizedek for which Jesus was the final member? First, his name is Hebrew for "King of Righteousness" and his title means "King of Peace." Abraham knew this man. On his return from defeating the kings of Mesopotamia up north of Galilee, he was dragging a massive load of spoil these kings had taken. By ancient custom in every land in that region, it all belonged to Abraham by right of conquest. Melchizedek, as a fellow worshiper of God Almighty, met him and brought out some refreshments. This was a very strong symbolic gesture and Abraham gave recognition of Melchizedek's priesthood of his own God by granting the priestly king a tenth of the spoils. The rest of the spoils Abraham righteously returned to the kings of the Pentapolis near the Dead Sea.

In this, Abraham operated by faith that such wealth would not benefit him, but would actually harm him. He had more than enough, anyway, and was regarded in those parts as a prince in his own right. Now, he was a proven master in battle, a battle by no means insignificant. It was all by faith, not by any human desire to dominate. Abraham would have been just as happy to

keep a low profile and hold a reputation as harmless. The Jews proudly pointed out how all their wealth was a gift from God, not taken from the likes of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, in all this pride, they failed to grasp the significance of Abraham giving a tithe to Melchizedek.

This priestly king was unknown, no official genealogy. All we know about his priesthood is Abraham's recognition of it. We have no idea who his parents were, when or where he was born, nor where he died and was buried. Symbolically, that means his priesthood is eternal, since no one can pinpoint the terminus of it. If the Jews had long recognized David's prophecy of the Messiah as being of that order, and Jesus was the Messiah, we must realize that this order of priesthood never ended. Was not David King of Salem? David touched the Ark without being struck dead. Was not this a sign that his righteousness and reign were at least theoretically marking him as a Priest of the Order of Melchizedek? Was not Jesus of his lineage, proven by pedigree? And was He not the Messiah, also of the Order of Melchizedek?

If the Levites, who receive the tithes of Israel under the Law of Moses, were born of Abraham, then while yet unborn they paid tithes to Melchizedek. Do not the lesser pay tithes to the greater? Surely, it isn't that hard to grasp! Jesus the Messiah, Priest of the Order of Melchizedek, belongs to an order that is greater and older than that of Aaron. The Aaronic order of priesthood and all it represented had a distinct beginning and end.

If the Law of Moses had been the final fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, then there would have never been any prophecies of a new priesthood rising from an ancient order. Changing from Aaronic DNA and pedigree to some other means of passing office means that Levitical Law was not intended to be permanent. David's prophecy in Psalm 110 was a subtle declaration that Moses had an endpoint. Indeed, we already have said Jesus was not a Levite, but of the Tribe of Judah, of which not a single man ever stood as priest under Moses. For a man of Judah to now stand as High Priest – prophesied by David as all Jews agree – it requires doing away with the Law of Moses. That Covenant of the Law ended in Christ. His priesthood was not about law, but faith. It returns things to the original covenant of redemption, to which both Abraham and Melchizedek adhered. It was a covenant marked by Eternal Life, not rooted in this world.

This Law of Moses is dead. Christ closed it forever, by opening the door for us all to come into the Presence of God. It was His promise from long ago. Priests are sworn in, passing through a very rigorous background check. Jesus was sworn in by His Father, having already established His background by divine birth. Notice how every Aaronic priest eventually died. There were a bunch of them. Jesus is a spiritual priest, standing in a spiritual realm, a spiritual temple, in the very presence of God Almighty, never again to die. His priesthood is eternal.

Unlike the Sons of Aaron, who have to keep offering a sacrifice for themselves first, before they can offer the sacrifices of others, Jesus is His own sacrifice, once and for all. He needed no sacrifice for Himself, because He was already sinless and pure, unlike every priest of Aaron. The Law of Moses placed in office men who were morally unfit, but as long as they and the nation met the ritual requirements, the system continued to work. And what was that work? It

was mere earthly blessings. Jesus was the one and only perfectly sinless man, the only one truly fit to be our High Priest. The result is pulling the whole business up into the spiritual realm, which is the only place to find God. Everything else is just symbolism.

Hebrews 8

Judaism is dead, a false religion. It has no God, because the only true living God no longer recognizes it. It can never be resurrected or Christ must die yet again. Christ is the ultimate High Priest of all Creation. He need not enter briefly the Holy of Holies every year and stand before the Mercy Seat. Instead, He sits upon that Mercy Seat. Further, His Mercy Throne is in Heaven, the one true Temple – the one built by God’s own hands. This is unlike the one Moses ordered. While it was indeed commanded by God at that time, it was but a model made by human hands, a poor copy of the real thing.

His offering is the one true offering, the only one that could actually bridge the chasm separating a Holy God and sinful men. Were Christ on earth, He could not be a priest of any sort, since the only priesthood appointed by God for the Nation of Israel was that of Aaron and his sons. They are but a symbol, the shadow cast on the ground by the brilliance of God’s glory shining onto the real thing. Their Temple was but a shadow of the real thing. At that, it was merely a conceptual model of God’s Courts above. That model was translated through the mind of a single man within a single cultural and historical context. The elements of that translation had a limited shelf life. Christ’s ministry is better, for He offered the one acceptable sacrifice – Himself. He brought about a better covenant, with better promises, because it is the eternal thing itself, not some perishable, contextual human translation.

That earlier Covenant of the Law was hardly perfect. It was a collection of mere symbols, a far lower “reality” pointing to something much higher. It was mundane. It was a shadow cast on the ground. The true Covenant of God Almighty was always a matter of mystical spiritual truth, something inexpressible on earth. So, He granted to this one nation of people a shadowy ritual observance to create a consciousness of something requiring a work of faith, something that no man could do in his own power. In theory, at least, the requirements of the Law were always within reach of human power. But the best you could hope to get from such ritual observance was a shadowy paradise of earthly proportions. It offered the best that any man could obtain in this life, but could not change an evil heart. That required faith, something the Law could only hint at, but could not produce.

So, this imperfect copy of real religion was never meant to be the end of the matter. Jeremiah warned shortly before the Fall of Jerusalem that there would be a new covenant sometime in the future. God had already decided long ago that the Law of Moses could not accomplish much. It was never meant to, for while it was well within the reach of any willing heart, the nation routinely failed even that simple demand. So the covenant established by the Exodus, the Covenant of the Law, could not write the will of God on man’s heart. It required something altogether different to do that. A new covenant that did not require people whipping up a

frenzy of human discipline, in this covenant God would put Himself in the hearts of men. There, His mercy and grace would manifest itself directly in the human soul, something the Law could never do.

Even back then, in the day of Jeremiah, the days of the Law were numbered. It had a distinct end point. It would become obsolete. For the people addressed by this writer, it was time to leave that behind, for Christ left this earth with the Covenant of Moses dead. The covenant in His Blood offered a much higher blessing, a blessing of spiritual and mystical redemption too grand for words, too grand for any mere material Temple and too grand for any mere ritual observance. The Law was dead.

Hebrews 9

There are no words to explain it. What troubled the audience of our writer troubles us still today, in that we are fallen. There is a vast gulf separating us from Eternity and eternal things. We can posit terms such as “the Spirit Realm,” but have no means to understand it. This was the whole point when Jesus explained the necessity of using parables to teach the Kingdom of Heaven. While the mind must capture some semblance of the truth, else the will cannot choose any proper obedience, ultimate reality largely bypasses the human consciousness. It operates on a wholly different level. Logic will only get you so far before it fails utterly. When presenting higher truths, it is necessary to use symbols, far more complicated than mere types and allegories. The ultimate truth of God’s revelation escapes human faculties, so all the Platonic and Aristotelian categories of pure logic fall far short. Truth is not taught; it is caught.

Everything that matters in the end is from God’s own hand. Unless and until He reaches out to you, you cannot turn to Him and embrace His revelation. The greatest minds in apologetics and debate cannot change a single thing in any human soul, because it’s not a matter of logic. Even the Law makes sense only within a limited frame of reference, a frame utterly missing from the West. Genuine faith is far above logic. To assume that faith must be reasonable is to cripple its power. It is a complete surrender to embrace the notion that anything other than logic is mere subjective wishfulness. True faith is utterly unreasonable; it demands that you surrender everything you are and follow One you cannot experience directly in the flesh. We who walk in faith make the most audacious claims in the world, utterly without sufficient evidence to prove anything at all. The death of an obscure man in an obscure little corner of some past empire is somehow the means to saving all mankind. If God doesn’t plant that in your spirit, you’ll never accept it.

Judaism and the Covenant of Moses died on the Cross with Jesus. Jews got comfortable with their rituals, their rules and the glorious trappings of their national character and religion. The physical structure and layout of the Tabernacle were symbolic from the start. For all its rigorously enforced separation from mundane use, it was never more than a mere symbol. If you want the details, you can read them in the Pentateuch. For all the beauty of the Ark of the Covenant, only one man ever saw it, and that once in any year. Just for that one peek, he had to

carry a blood sacrifice, still warm from the animal. This blood was the ritual covering for his sins and the sins of those he represented outside. It only covered unintentional sins. It could by no means cover intentional sins because it could not change the heart of any man. It only helped those already convinced.

The way to God's cleansing power of eternal forgiveness was never actually opened by that ritual and apparatus. The rituals were little more than calling for behavior modification. Ritual gained what little could be gained by human effort. Not that it was completely unimportant, but it was never more than a symbol of things that mattered eternally.

Christ came as the final Heavenly High Priest. His coming was prophesied in every detail of the symbolism built into the Tabernacle's design. The Tabernacle where Christ serves was not built by human hands and required no service of maintenance by an army of Levites. He did not enter this Tabernacle with blood from some poor unfortunate goat, lamb or bull, but with His own blood. He only had to do it once. If all that animal gore could have actually accomplished anything, it was mere ritual purification of things temporal. Could the priest's inspection of an animal really find any measure of perfection? Could he truly know the inherent nature of the victim about to die? Yet, we know Jesus Christ came before God with God's own purity, sinless and spotless because His nature defined holiness.

The power of that offering was real in the Spirit Realm, more real than here on this temporal plane. It has the power to reach inside a soul and completely change any human, to remake him into a new creature and to fit him for an eternal life not confined to his earth. Not just making his sin hidden from God, but removing it, overpowering it, rooting it out from his very nature. A gap is inserted between the flesh and soul that widens as God's Spirit redeems ever more of the life, until the soul is ready to dismiss the flesh. Thus, God sees not the awful evil in which we are all born, but He sees His Son. In making that great sacrifice, His Son inherited everything God had desired to offer in Creation in the first place.

We know an inheritance requires death before it is passed. Until death, a man's will is just a piece of paper. The Covenant of the Law given through Moses was God's will in that sense. It had no real power. In all grave seriousness, it was inaugurated with the sacrifice of many animals. It was a long ritual of dedication that did not grant actual physical control to anyone. It had tremendous potential, concerning the inheritance of all Creation, but no power to make it happen until someone involved in making the will died. Moses didn't make it; he just passed it on as an attorney, a junior law clerk. Someone in the godhead must die before anything changed. The Law was a mere promise, which Israel kept in the manner of a living document safe. In due time, when the death took place, the will would be executed and the estate would pass.

In ancient times, a covenant was solemnized – purified, set apart, made holy – by a blood sacrifice. Everyone understood it as a symbol of the seriousness of the matter. You might have paid in the blood of an animal you owned, but it implied you expected to pay with your own blood if you failed to keep the covenant. Given that all the physical symbols of the Law were

solemnized with animal blood, what would be the source of blood for solemnizing the real stuff in Heaven? Again, we note the real Tabernacle of God is in Heaven. The earthly Tabernacle carried and maintained by Israel, and the Temples later, were never more than mere shadowy symbols, physical models of God's Heavenly Courts above. Christ brought His own blood.

In this fallen world, the human mind continually slips back into sin. It requires a constant reminder of God's standards, brought home forcefully, to keep us on track. Not to keep us faithful – no external force on earth can do that. Rituals and laws only keep us conscious and aware of our sinfulness; that's the sole value of religion on this earth. Heaven isn't like that. There is no bondage under time to wear away at awareness. Once a thing is done, it is eternal, as is the awareness of it. Jesus didn't have to keep dying every year in Heaven like sacrificial animals here on earth. Naturally, any given victim here on earth could die only once. Once Jesus brought His blood before the Throne as the only possible sacrifice acceptable for human sin, it was done. Then He sat down on that Throne Himself, unlike the human high priests who simply splashed a little blood on the symbolic Mercy Seat. Jesus eternally took His place on the Mercy Seat in Heaven.

A fundamental principle of human existence is that you live only once. You die and then face God's judgment. Jesus died and faced that judgment for us, since there was nothing in Him to judge. He has inherited the Kingdom. We are used to images of heirs taking the bequest before a judge, paying a tax and having the judge validate their inheritance. At some point, the heir returns to the property in question and takes physical ownership. As Heaven counts time, it will be only a short passage between Christ taking His throne in Heaven and then returning to actually rule and reign physically. He won't come the second time in the form of fallen mankind, but in His true form. When He comes, He will change all of us who belong to Him into that same Heavenly form.

Hebrews 10

A Hebrew mind should have realized long ago that the sacrificial system commanded by Moses was only ever symbolic. Yes, those rituals were surely commanded by God. Still, it takes a hard headed fool to never make any effort to understand why. God is not a closed book, but from the very first moment of Creation has offered to reveal His very nature to any creature who seeks to know Him. If so very many people prior to Moses understood that the blood ritual of making a covenant was entirely symbolic of a much higher truth, how is it the Jews lost sight of that? They made a concerted effort not to know, largely because empty ritual was more reasonable than commitment in faith. So our writer bluntly states what should have been obvious: The blood offering on the Day of Atonement was an empty gesture if you didn't bring your heart to God.

David saw it so clearly in Psalm 40, when he prophesied on behalf of the Messiah, his own descendant, the clear declaration of what really mattered. Just like dead-hearted Jews of Jesus' day, we could argue all day long whether the proper reading of the Hebrew text in Psalm 40:6 is

“a body you have prepared for me” (Septuagint) or “you have bored my ear” (Masoretic), thus easily losing sight of how little difference it made from a proper biblical Hebrew point of view. Frankly, our author passes right over that phrase to point out the obvious: God never cared about the details of ritual offerings if He had your faith. When the Messiah comes into the world, says David, He would offer the only thing acceptable to God in the first place – the whole self. Boring the ear could be a matter of hearing clearly, or could reflect a public ritual marking entrance into permanent slavery (Exodus 21:1-6). The Septuagint reading was a reference to the Virgin Birth of Christ. It really doesn’t matter which reading you prefer. In the Hebrew mind, they all result in the same thing, because it was never about precise wording any more than it was about precise ritual observance. If God owns your ears, your lifelong service or your body on the Cross, each is a mere image of what He demanded from the beginning.

So in following Christ to the Cross, we fulfill all that God ever commanded of anyone anywhere. This is the summation, the ground of truth to which the author was taking his readers all along. Going back to the Temple and slaughtering an animal was worse than wasteful, for it would support a system that had far removed itself from the original meaning given by Moses. Even that original was meant to pass away. Jesus paid it all and the Temple was just a nifty pile of rocks on a far away ridge in a land of no great significance any more. The Law of Moses was a poor shadow of the much higher Law of God. That higher Law of God can be written only in human hearts. In our modern terms, we call that having convictions, an inescapable call to holiness. Where His divine Law is written, no other law is binding, because God has declared such a heart acceptable in His sight. He is the Law personified; He defines Justice.

Faithfulness to God now is defined in walking with Christ. He is the ultimate High Priest; He has brought us Himself individually into the Presence of Almighty God in the only real Temple in Heaven. How can we not in Christ have full assurance His Father will receive us gladly? The only thing left is to remember that a part of us is stuck temporarily in this fallen world of human flesh and we need to keep an eye on each other. Not in terms of behavior, but in terms of fruit of the Spirit. The writer warns the Jewish Christians to keep on meeting together for Christian worship despite how it draws persecution. Fruit inspection by its very nature requires that we meet together regularly to celebrate this grace and love we share in Christ, all the more so when we consider that He’s coming back.

Even though the Law of Moses was a mere shadow of God’s Law, those who defied it died without mercy. They lost only their earthly life, but who’s to say whether they ended up in Hell afterward? People entrusted to execute the Law of Moses were hardly perfect, but if we defy the Law of God, it’s no longer a matter of mere physical death. Defiance marks an eternal death. We don’t even have words for what happens to someone who treats God’s own Son with contempt. If, after all you’ve tasted in this life of the life to come, you heap contempt upon God’s living Word of Grace, where can you go to escape God’s wrath? The writer wonders what had happened to that strong stand of faith they took when they first turned to Christ. They seemed

quite willing to stand with others who suffered oppression from their fellow Jews for that declared faith. Even our writer was arrested for it. Everyone had all their stuff confiscated under the Talmud, but everyone also had the riches of faith, by which measure, stuff was of no significance. Is persecution from Rome so different? Where did that bold confidence go?

Habakkuk said it so well in chapter 2 of his prophecy: God does not operate on a human scale of time. A couple of years loom large for us, but in His eyes, it's just a moment. We should be striving to make our senses adjust to His. The ancient biblical concept held that time was not a thing to divide into regular units of measure. You did not schedule events by counting those units, but by counting the completion of spiritual marks in the soul. If your faith is not complete, then it requires you to climb a little higher. Take that gift of grace that empowers a firm stand in trying times and wait out God's schedule. God sees your sorrow; you need to see His power. You won't escape human sorrow until He's finished remaking you. It's not God delaying things; it's our sin. Cut off another chunk of fallen nature and grip your faith a little tighter. To draw back now into the false womb of Judaism is the road to Hell.

As a historical note, we see that the writer refers to the Temple as present reality in his world, still standing. We know Jesus warned His disciples it would all be destroyed, that there would be a day when His followers must flee Jerusalem. Historical records indicate Rome invaded in force around 67 AD, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It's not hard to imagine our writer sees this on the verge of coming true. As tensions in Palestine heated up between Rome and the Jewish leadership, it would be easy to see Roman soldiers harassing Jews and Christians alike, so Jewish Christians were hardly exempt. All the more would they face oppression, living as they did in the imperial capital of Rome. Soon there would be no Temple service to which they could return for the sake of familiarity and comfort. They were literally on the verge of being cast adrift into Christ alone, and they needed to see this as their new home of the soul.

Hebrews 11

The Roll of Faith, and the Role of Faith – so popular is this chapter that people quickly forget the context. It's more than a hymn honoring the faith of the Patriarchs, but a note to our Jewish Christian readers that the legacy of their best examples is more about faith than about Judaism. From the very beginning, it was not rituals and Law that made these people memorable, but their commitment in faith to what God had commanded and promised. From the very beginning, it was faith that distinguished saints from the rest of humanity.

Faith cannot be defined by attributes, but by its results. This is the standard spiritual understanding of things. Thus, it is roughly equivalent to the term "commitment." It is rooted outside human space and does not yield to logical probing. When God commands and promises, we assume that it's true and act accordingly. We cannot walk away from it. No matter what our senses tell us, we defy them even. Its call to action is ultimate and is the measure of what truly matters. We do what we must, regardless of cost. As a spiritual exercise, it is directly

tied to God's act of creation, partakes of the same stuff of God Himself.

Where the record of Scriptures holds someone up as a model of obedience and reliance on God, it is also a model of faith. Whatever else we may say of Abel's offering compared to Cain's, the difference was a matter of faith in God. That was the key; the substance of the offering by Law was hardly the issue, but faith behind the offering. Abel's faith cost him his life. By contrast, Enoch didn't die at all. His faith made him too holy for this world, a holiness measured by desire for God. While Noah's faith didn't keep him from eventually dying, it was a rather mundane death of old age, long after he and his family survived as the only souls to walk on the earth after the Flood. Their faith was an active condemnation of the sin of the world.

Faith compelled Abraham to leave behind everything that mattered to him. His faith was the power to obey blindly in traveling to a far land. Not just a land he was told he would inherit, but because he knew the promise to his descendants was a mere symbol of something far greater, a place in Heaven above. He and Sarah had the audacity to believe God's promise that they would bear a son so very late in life. That son became the grand nation of Israel and far more, for his true descendants are those of faith, which outnumber any mere human census. Faith compelled them to leave that beloved homeland in Mesopotamia and live as wanderers in a place they never owned. To them, it hardly mattered in light of the spiritual inheritance, for they were strangers to earth itself. Faith embraces that Spirit Realm that has no boundaries.

Because of that conviction, Abraham was not troubled at the impending death of his only son on that altar on Mount Moriah. If God wanted Isaac's life, surely he would give it back since He promised this life was Abraham's future. God could not fail. That faith was passed down through Isaac, who foresaw his sons' destiny. Jacob in old age prophesied that his family would bring his bones back from Egypt to the land Abraham never owned, escaping the slavery of Pharaoh.

Faith demanded Moses forsake his Egyptian adoption and join his people in slavery. It was that same faith his parents held that kept him alive when others his age were sacrificed to the Nile gods. Moses knew a Messiah was coming to set them free, that they could ignore their bondage and set their eyes on Heaven. That was good enough to leave behind all the good things Egypt might have offered had Moses reigned there. So, they celebrated the Sparing ("Passover") of their lives, not with sneering at the dying Egyptians, but as a symbol of things much higher than this world. When commanded to walk into the sea, they obeyed and God's plan for their rescue slaughtered the Egyptians, all without any swords or weapons of any kind.

Faith also knocked down the massive walls of Jericho, but held up that portion sheltering Rahab. On it went, through the Period of Judges and Monarchy, faith made all the difference in choosing to believe and obey God's promises, whether it meant living in safety or dying without mercy. It mattered not either way, for faith rises above this life and outlives death. There is no logic to what faith demands, or what it brings. Rather, it is its own logic, a perspective that treats this world and its delights with contempt.

Judaism had sold its birthright of faith and symbolic logic for the pottage of human insight. Jews had ransomed their otherworldly perspective for shiny metal and dirt, wealth and lands. By human standards, there was nothing greater, but by spiritual standards, it was all foolishness. Did these readers believe the trappings of their old religion were really so valuable? Did they blanch at mere human misery when they stood to lose Eternity? Everything they thought they knew and had as their legacy was more about faith and Christ than about Law and ritual.

Hebrews 12

The Jewish readers living in Rome would have quickly recognized the imagery of athletic competition. When competing before a home crowd, most athletes perform better. Having just reviewed the legends of faith from Israeli history, the writer speaks of them as spectators in the stands. Let them see you do well! The event is living by faith. It requires setting aside this world and all its cares, stripping down to the bare essentials of walking by The Spirit. All the more must they commit for the long haul, since this is an endurance event.

The finish line is coming face to face with Jesus Christ. Don't get lost in the details of the race conditions, but keep your eyes on the point of it all: Jesus incarnated in us. He raced with gusto, enjoying His life because He never got tangled up in things that don't matter. The Cross in His path hardly slowed Him. That it was all so shameful from a human perspective was of no concern. His own finish line was His place at the Father's right hand, the place held by the Executive Officer, the one who exercised the ruler's power. As with many retired champions, He is now the referee of participants. How did He win? You must emulate His style in facing sin, or you will fail. He allowed nothing to dissuade Him from His course of obedience.

The Jewish Christians in Rome had not yet faced significant violence, it seems. They mistook social and economic pressures for real persecution. The writer reminds them that they had hardly paid in blood for following Christ. The reason was because they weren't trying hard enough. Not in the sense of provoking needless bloodshed, but the proper attitude was paying no heed to that price in the drive to obey His teaching and follow His example. If they were to be crucified, it's only just that they suffer for their sins whatever Christ suffered for no sin at all. Don't look upon the hatred of sinners as injustice. Look upon it as the whip hand of the Father, removing from them sinful habits (Proverbs 3:11-12). If you aren't suffering with Christ, how can you claim to be a fellow heir of the Son? We would consider it scandalous if any man failed to spank his children for misbehavior. Yet in our hearts we know that human parents often err in their discipline, simply doing the best they know. God Our Father never errs in correcting His children.

Only madmen enjoy pain. We don't go out of our way looking for misery; there's nothing virtuous in suffering itself. When our pain reflects the efforts of God to refine our conduct, to make us more like Jesus, we should celebrate His loving care! It makes us stronger, able to negotiate the obstacles of sin in our path. Don't go looking for trouble; it will find you soon

enough. Do your best to be loving and peaceful with all people. You don't have to be confrontational to make it clear what sin is. Set your eyes on Heaven; become otherworldly. Don't use the inevitability of sinful people around you as an excuse to bog your life down with their sins. Would you rather end up like Esau? Jews typically spat at the mention of his name. He tossed away his eternal spiritual inheritance in exchange for a single meal. Nothing he did later could revoke that choice.

This is not like the Exodus, camping at the foot of Mount Sinai. We aren't called to follow precise rules of conduct, for which failing means execution. The revelation of God's will does not come to us in unbearable voices of thunder, or in terms demanding too much of us. No, we live in the shadow of Mount Zion, the real Zion in Heaven. We are called to keep our eyes on the Spirit Realm, the only thing that matters. Angels are there to strengthen us along with that crowd of faithful souls that went before us, all sharing in one spiritual existence, as our feet remain rooted here in this fallen world. Jesus is there, with His Blood sacrifice having made us fit to stand there in our spirits. If the blood of Abel cried out to God from the earth, witnessing to a great sin, how much louder and more insistent is the Blood of Jesus' crying out for our redemption, mercy and grace?

If the Law of Moses could take your temporal life, do you not see how the Law of Christ could take your eternal soul? That same Blood of Jesus cries out your name, calling you to remain faithful to the Covenant of Christ. We know the voice of God shook the earth at Mount Sinai, but He has promised that He will shake it just one more time. Quoting a Messianic Promise from Haggai 2:6, our writer warns this latter shaking will shake all the earth and Heaven, too. Haggai's point was to show that the latter shaking would be a clear departure from the previous. Not simply shaking to get our attention, but it would be a shaking to remove anything that cannot stand before God Almighty. Fallen Creation cannot bear the presence of a holy God, so He withdrew a distance by sending mere symbols of His divine presence. In His real presence in Heaven, we must leave behind anything that can be shaken; only what is eternal will go there. If your composure is so easily shaken, it is founded on the wrong thing. Build your life on the grace of God, not something that was designed for mere temporary use, as was the Covenant of Moses.

The Kingdom of Heaven is built in purity, holy from the start. If you are part of that, there is nothing left of Moses to which you can return. All of that will burn up in the fire of God's wrath. If that is where your heart is, you will be consumed, as well. The fire of God purifies and the persecution faced by Jewish Christians in Rome was designed to pull them farther away from Moses, farther into Christ. If they turn back now, Christ was no part of them in the first place.

Hebrews 13

A short time after this letter to Jewish Christians in Rome was published, Rome destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and killed over a million Jewish people. As a discrete political entity, the

Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. All that remained was a cultural identity, a very dilute ethnic identity and a dead religion. Our writer shows clearly that there was no need to mourn the loss, for the one thing worth having had already been offered by Jesus: an eternal identity as Child of God; nothing else matters. After the Resurrection, God's plans for earthly Israel ended once and for all. His Son had completed the failed mission of Israel, had become Israel. God now sees only the mission of revelation in His Son as the meaning of the name "Israel." There was nothing left to which these Christians could return. The final chapter rehearses certain pragmatic examples of what it meant to be "Israel" in Christ.

Brotherly love was a quintessential Hebrew faith commitment to each other. While loving sinners might be quite difficult at times, there was no excuse for not loving a fellow servant of Christ. Prodding his Jewish readers, the writer reminds them of Abraham, whom they claimed as their father. That man offered proper Semitic hospitality to visitors, who turned out later to be angels. You never know whom some stranger may turn out to be, but if there is reason to claim them as a fellow Christian, that's all you need to know. Indeed, that bond is stronger than any other on this earth. If your brother is in prison, it matters not why he's there; he remains your brother, an object of sacrificial support. We are all in prison on this earth, longing for the release to our heavenly life. Yet, this love must remain fully virtuous, not as pigs sharing a good wallow in moral sewage. Christ's love is pure love.

We love the King and His Kingdom. We do not love the things of this earth. Material gain is not your god. Our Father provides what we need and what He provides is all we need. If other people take your stuff, if they take your peace and comfort in the flesh – even if they take your life – they can't really do anything to change your standing before God. Is there anything else that matters? And if you can tolerate unjust government by sinners, can you not peacefully serve under Christian leaders who actually love you? Nobody said they were perfect, so love them and support them, because you aren't perfect, either. If you have any objections, express them in love. These people seek the same thing you do: manifesting the unchanging Christ in a world of chaos. That chaos has no place in the fellowship of believers.

You are foreign to Judaism and its ways are foreign to Christ. Stop carping over kosher laws as if they mattered to God. Your eternal soul is built up by grace, not by observing dietary restrictions, which are merely a matter of the flesh. The priests in Jerusalem, with all their grave ritual fastidiousness, are unfit to partake of our spiritual food in Heaven. Have you ever noticed that the most sacred offerings were burned outside the camp? Did you notice that only their blood was brought into the Tabernacle? Jesus was the most sacred offering of all and He was sacrificed outside the City of Jerusalem, as if He were somehow unfit to die inside the walls. God's own Son offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice Moses could ever demand, yet died outside the Law. We must leave the Law to come to Him. If we do not take up His shame and bear it in this life we now have left, we cannot stand before God Almighty. Whatever other Jews do to you is nothing compared to what they did to God's own Son, so you can surely afford to bear a little of their contempt.

The Eternal City of God does not stand anywhere on this earth. If all your hope stands with that pile of rocks in Palestine, you have no hope. The only offering God accepts now must come through Christ. It begins with your bold praising of Him, singing hymns to His Name. You give your stuff to Him by sharing willingly with fellow believers in need. You obey God's Law by yielding to the leaders in your Christian fellowship. These people aren't leading you astray when they teach leaving Moses, but are shepherding your souls into Heaven. By giving them grief, you only harm yourselves.

The writer ends with a few personal notes. He misses them, and longs to be back in their company. In his benediction, he uses terms that remind them one last time that the Kingdom of Christ is far, far above anything symbolizing it in Moses. The way to the God of Israel is through Christ alone; it is His standard of conduct that fulfills God's commands. That conduct includes letting preachers and teachers remind them of these things, because letters such as this can hardly fulfill their spiritual needs.

The writer notes Timothy has been released from custody, presumably related to whatever happened to Paul. The writer is waiting for Timothy to join him so they can travel together to Rome and fellowship once again with the readers. Until then, let the leaders on hand have the same respect as they hold for the writer. The residents from Rome there, wherever the writer sits, send their greetings, too. If there is anything we all need, it's grace.

James

James identified his target audience as Jewish Christians wherever they may be. It's not as if Gentiles don't benefit from the teachings, but this message points out weaknesses peculiar to Jewish believers. Placing it in the proper context, we discover James is hoping to separate his fellow Jewish Christians from the Talmud. The Talmud turned God's justice and Law into legalism, turned God into a slot machine and sucked the life out of a deeply symbolic covenant. While James does not mention the Talmud, he offered a regimen impossible to obey while clinging to its teachings. It's not as if they taught the Talmud in their church meetings, but it had so deeply stained their thinking that it required pointed sharp commands to reawaken the ancient Hebrew mysticism.

Prevailing tradition says that the writer is the eldest half-brother of Jesus, the second child born of Mary. Jesus visited him within a day or so of His resurrection, settling any previous doubts about His claim to divinity. This younger brother went on to become the chief elder of all the Jewish Christians in Judea, not a preacher like his brother. Thus, he writes this letter as the tribal chief of Jewish Christians wherever they were to be found. We understand that this was written rather early, within a few years of 40 AD. James was martyred around 65 AD in Jerusalem, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah with his dying words.

James 1

This first chapter summarizes all that follows in the rest of this letter. This is the most Jewish of all New Testament documents and does not follow the Greek standards for correspondence. Rather it simply states who sends it and for whom it was intended – Jews of the Diaspora. Those who weren't believers might read this, but it's not likely, so we understand it as a Christian epistle.

If anyone knew a thing or two about persecution, it was James. As the chief ruling elder of the Christians in Judea, he was the entire focus of the Sanhedrin's wrath after Jesus Ascended into Heaven. His approach is quite obvious right away: Persecution is the mark of God's favor. How could we expect less from a world that hated Jesus? Persecution drives us into an otherworldly mindset. The only way you can persevere is to decide it can't stop you serving Christ. This is a direct contrast to the Talmudic view, which said the primary mark of God's favor was material wealth and comfort. James advises that if you don't understand all this, you should ask God for wisdom. Naturally, you have to come before Him fully committed against persecution, or you'll never understand it. People who dither between the old Talmudic lies and the mystical faith of Christ aren't ready to face this radical change.

Faith is paradox. If you come to Christ as a poor man, or if coming to Christ makes you poor, rejoice that nothing holds you back. You can rise to the skies! If you come with much material wealth, rejoice that you can be free to shed your human arrogance. Everything in this world will pass all too quickly, so nothing here matters.

Indeed, the mark of God's favor is the power to resist the temptation to go back to the old ways of the Talmud. One of the false teachings is that He who created all things also created temptation, thus some rationalized to themselves that it was a sign from God telling you this or that sin was really not a sin, at least not this time. Temptations do not come from God because it is contrary to His nature. Rather, temptation comes from our fallen nature. Something in our flesh cries out for things God does not grant and if we listen too long, we'll find an excuse to surrender. Soon, it will own us, and drag us down to death. Don't listen to sweet sounding lies of human logic. Whatever God gives is always good and just and He is the model of consistency. He shines the light of truth eternally from His Person and Scripture was granted to us Jews, says James, that we should be first among nations to pound the path to Him. If Israel had embraced God's justice, the rest of the world would have followed them.

Israel's mission to tell the world is not dead, but has been entrusted to God's Son. To reclaim their lost heritage required that Jews set aside all the filth that clung to them in their arrogance, that they humble themselves before Christ, the living Scripture of God. There is no other hope for eternity. It is not enough to find His teaching entertaining, as so many did when He walked this earth, but to live it. Anything less is lying to yourself. It's not enough to glance in the mirror a single time and see your face; that memory will dim very soon. Rather, you must continually compare yourself to the glory of God reflected in His revelation. There you will find the True Law of God which sets you free, and place the mark of Heaven on all you do.

Want to talk about good religion? Put the bridle and bit of God in your mouth. Don't talk about it; just obey it. One of the first things people will see is your compassion for those whom life has tossed a bad lot. It's not like their poverty is some disease you'll catch. The real defilement is acting like the Talmudic Jews who cling to their stuff. They could understand the intellectual concept that faith produces a change in behavior, but they had no power to make it stick.

James 2

Talmudic Jews had developed a nasty habit of adopting Greek words, using Greek meanings, to replace Hebrew concepts from Hebrew words. Thus, what began as the Hebrew concept of faith – commitment, loyalty to God – became associated with the Hellenized concept of intellectual assent. The proper way to translate was to read Hebrew concepts into the nearest Greek term, ensuring that everyone knew it carried a new weight and understood that it was merely an approximation. Talmudic scholars were simply looking for an escape clause from the higher spiritual duty of mortification. They allowed the Greek intellectual approach to destroy the ancient Hebrew spiritual depth.

If you are partial to Jesus Christ as Your Lord, you won't be partial with your fellow humans. We know how Jews act in synagogues. The rich guy comes in and all the rabbis bow and scrape to ingratiate themselves with people who wield power and influence in this world. The poor man comes in wearing his only ragged covering and the sole reason you acknowledge him at all is to make him sit on the floor and stay out of the way. James asks: Is it not the poor whom Jesus sought as those most likely to place their faith in Him without hesitation? Jesus said the poor inherited His Kingdom. And what actions characterize the rich and powerful? They believe they have nothing to gain and everything to lose by trusting in Christ. They'll be the first to drag you before the magistrates for the slightest provocation. They don't hesitate to blaspheme the Name of Our Savior for the smallest fits of pique. This has more to do with the sort of character it takes to gain and hold such wealth in this world, a character Our Savior radically changes.

The Kingdom of Christ has a royal law: Our treatment of each other has nothing to do with earthly standing, since we are all fallen in God's sight. Rather, we adopt the sacrificial love of Christ as the starting point. Treat both rich and poor with that same respect and let things take shape from there. Jesus summarized this as the whole of man's duty before God, a capsule of all the Scripture, regarding how we deal with each other. Nor can you rank yourselves by giving different weights to different commandments from Scripture. If you aren't perfect as Christ was, you deserve God's wrath. Much better by far, if we cling to the Cross and live by the Law of Grace, which requires that we apply the same standard to every person we encounter. It takes all your commitment, all your might. You can't cling to the Cross with one hand and slap folks with some legalistic worldly standard using the other hand.

What's the point of a Hellenistic kind of "faith" if such faith accomplishes nothing? Did the Father send His Son only to talk? Did He not die on the Cross voluntarily? Why do you cling to

Pharisaical practices, since the Pharisees demanded His death? So, you see someone in your community in real need and all you have to offer are nice words? Don't speak blessings if you aren't willing to be those blessings. Mere intellectual faith is dead, a rotting stink in God's nostrils. We end up with silly debates over words. Hellenism is a lie; faith is not simply a concept separate from works. Don't tell me about your faith if you can't back it up with the works Jesus did. Can you discuss God intellectually? So can demons and they tremble in fear. Do you tremble before God, too? All this business of distinctions between "being versus doing" is evil. Faith and works are two faces of the same spiritual heart.

Let's talk about our ancestor, Abraham. Can you separate faith and works in his offering of Isaac? The only reason we can discern his faith is because of his actions. Faith as a mere concept of the mind has no anchor in God's revelation. Without the evidence of his actions, Scripture could not refer to Abraham as believing God and finding justification as God's trusted retainer. Either we need a new Greek word for it, or we have to imply a new meaning with it, because God isn't going to be impressed much by faith without works. At the other extreme from Abraham, we have the harlot, Rahab. Hardly in Abraham's intellectual class, with none of his earthly power and wealth, she gained a welcome with God because she acted on her faith, helping the spies.

A body without a soul is dead meat. Even so, faith as a concept distinguished from the works of faith is a stinking corpse, a peculiar flaw of Aristotelian logic. If your faith is limited to what you know in your mind, your spirit is still dead. Even today the assertion, "faith without works is dead," has become chiefly a cerebral argument, an excuse to impose legalism, because Western Christianity fundamentally rejects the ancient Hebrew mysticism.

James 3

Not only do we have problems with words, but with the tongue, as well. We picture here the typical Jewish believer so recently under the sway of the Talmud. To be taken seriously in Talmudic society, a man had to speak up in the synagogue. The more he could teach, correct, or at least dispute something, the greater his ranking. This is not the Christian way of things. It is God's prerogative to call teachers, specially equipped. This was not some frivolous thing where making noise was more important than what the noise meant.

Christian leadership was a heavy burden, not some sweet privilege. It meant all the other things believers had to do to walk in a real faith, plus the extra burden helping others with their walk. It was natural that anyone who taught others should realize the gravity of engaging his mouth. He could not afford frivolity, because his role as leader and teacher meant all eyes were upon him. Not because he was any greater than the others, but the role demanded it. Ambition was a primary disqualification. If anything, leaders are more taciturn, saving talk for something important.

So, James warns them that the mouth is one of the easiest entries for Satan. A man who kept his mouth shut and spoke after careful consideration was master of his whole being. It's amazing

how much is accomplished by taking control of one pivotal thing like that. It's horrifying how much is destroyed when you do not. It's the same as simple civility. Civil people mind their own business and avoid spilling their unneeded comments into the space we all must share. We should only address things that come into our spaces, and then do so with great spiritual care. A lot of things we should simply let go, for we are not the truth police correcting every little misapprehension. Much of our communication should be an attempt to lubricate human interaction with kindness. How utterly unnatural it was that the same tongue should bless and curse frivolously. A genuine faith that is not mere thoughts and words will produce a sweet fruit of the Spirit through the work of the tongue.

If it is so important to show wisdom, then measure it the way God does, not as men. The source of one's wisdom is everything. A wise man has all the time in the world for people to catch on when they are ready and he counts the whole world as loss against the smallest blessing of grace. The rivalry encouraged in the synagogue has no place in Christ. It's better to keep your mouth shut than to confirm you are a fool. Sharp politics can only please Satan, since it is his work.

The work of God's wisdom is to purify and pacify your fellowship. It makes you gentle and welcoming, eager to share His Spirit. You carry around big baskets of mercy and answers to problems. The only thing you won't have is favoritism and fakery. When you seek peace with others, you can put out a lot of fires.

James 4

Few chapters in the New Testament are so damning as this one for describing the sins of modern Western Christians. We have bought into the lies of the Pharisees. In ancient times, the Hebrew prophets understood all too well how the Pentateuch itself claimed the Law was merely an indicator of things that could not be written or spoken. Hebrew language presumes that what really matters to us cannot be shared in mere words. The language presumes a parabolic expression most of the time. There is precious little direct discussion of the afterlife because it was expected that the reader knew there was no way to describe it. Observing the Law of Moses did bring a better life here, but it was limited and there was copious warning that the Law was not a vending machine. The whole thing hinged on grasping the fallen nature of mankind and the necessity of a penitent heart. Prophets warned repeatedly that simply going through the motions missed the whole point. Men were to seek God's favor, certain that His provision would be a result. The mark of God's favor was *shalom* – a modicum of comfort and safety under God's divine hand, enough to support the mission of revealing God's glory. When the Hellenizing influences perverted Hebrew intellectual culture, materialism became the signature of Judaism. In the Talmud, all consideration of the higher realm was lost and God's favor was presumed measured by one's wealth.

Thus, James slams those clinging to the Talmudic knee-jerk reflex about material success. Good men of God seek no power over the lives of others, nor do they seek excuses to live large at the

expense of others. It was wrong in the Old Testament; Jesus taught it was wrong and it remains wrong until this world ends. Every conflict among men arises from one thing, James warns: human lusts. When you allow that part of your fallen nature to rule, the result is murderous conflict, both among nations and among individuals. If you cannot approach God with a clear conscience, it's time to work on moving your mind to the place where a conscience becomes clear. Stop seeking what fallen men seek; seek peace with God. He provides all you need, but it will certainly be quite different from what your flesh wants. Peace with God tends to ignore what the flesh finds inconvenient.

James equates these lusts with adultery against God. You cannot be at peace with the world and God at the same time. Have we forgotten the Cross? The Blood was an incalculable price God paid for peace with us, so that He could unite with us in His Spirit. Regardless of how you read the syntax of the passage about God's jealousy, the point remains that His Spirit lives in us and He intends to remain personally connected. He is deeply offended when we take no trouble to learn His spiritual ways. The starting point is getting rid of the arrogance that naturally arises from thinking your worldly success indicates that you have merit with God. No man living has merit with God! He wants to see only His grace and the life it creates in you. If you don't die to self, you can't even approach Him.

Get this one thing worked out and Satan will flee: Nail your flesh to the Cross and discard all your worldly plans and anxieties. Does God fail to provide some thing that you wish? You don't need it; get over it. Does He demand something you want to avoid? Take it to the Cross. We are only joyful when our human heart is broken and weeping before Him. It's not an act we perform, but a place we reside, the place at the feet of God.

From our new home of denying this world, we can expect to learn that one sinner can hardly judge another. The Law of Moses itself makes this clear, in demanding that you come often trembling to the Temple with all the offerings you can afford. You don't have enough to buy His mercy, but a willingness to pay any price makes it available to you. God gave the Law; He is the Judge. This is not a game where the highest score wins, because Jesus is the standard. Penitent people are too busy worrying over their own sins to keep score over a brother.

In the Land of Penitence, we don't make proud plans based on worldly business sense. There is nothing wrong with commerce when you are joyfully prepared to take a monetary loss for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our business is the King's business, and everything else is just a way of meeting customers for His mercy and grace. So, if the Lord sends me out with a load of goods, He gets to decide what "success" means; human accounting is utterly useless in the matter. If you know you belong to the Kingdom of Heaven and can't bring yourself to sacrifice any and all things for the needs of Heaven, you are in sin.

James 5

All creation is a tool for God's glory. People who trust in material things and worldly power cannot serve that glory. We trust the Creator, not the creation. James continues with a prophetic

warning to anyone who takes comfort in their worldly wealth. The image of gold and silver corroding is not meant literally, but that they corrupt the heart. Western Christianity shares with the Pharisees a horrifying blindness to this truth: When you turn to Christ, all you are and have becomes His. If you then die wealthy, it is hard to imagine that you were obedient. Call it what you will, but people in church who don't hurry to deploy their material possessions for the Kingdom, seeking to purchase His greater glory here below, aren't Kingdom people. James cries out in a warning: If you cling to this world, you will be owned by it; you will perish when the Lord comes to destroy this world. Let Him return to find us penniless because we were faithful stewards purchasing what was needed for His glory.

We take a moment here to crush the particular Western sin of materialism. God's Word insists that the most important thing you can do for your children is to let them see your otherworldly disregard for material possessions. Using children as an excuse for being a tightwad is not supported in Scripture, any more than giving from a false sense of guilt. We have allowed the feminist nest-feathering demon to dominate our understanding of this issue. Women are cursed by the Fall, the same as men, and acquiescing to feminine demands over every little thing that touches their motherhood instinct is as wrong as eating the Forbidden Fruit. Voluntary poverty, children and all, is not a sin if creature comforts require a spiritual compromise. Don't let the secular world define your morality. Learn how to address your convictions, not your feelings and reason on such things. James would hammer the modern Western churches at least as much as those he addressed in his letter.

James points out the sins of wealthy Talmudists, always contrary to the plain command of Moses. They were obliged to pay day-laborer wages at the end of the day, not cling to it as if their labor was nothing and the gold was precious. Even the Talmud referred to it figuratively as murder to deprive the poor and powerless of their just wages. This was merely one example of the greedy taking advantage of their power to buy justice when accused. God would not be so easily bought off when He comes as Judge of Eternity.

Yet, by the same token, James warns the poor not to be envious and wrathful. This world is evil; bad things happen and injustice is simply a feature of our existence. By no means was it right to use human power to fight back. Instead, we rely on God to keep track of things. His justice is not always apparent on this plane of existence, but it never fails in Heaven. It will all be over soon enough. So, we should be forgiving and patient with our brothers, because we are no better than they are as we all stand before the Lord.

What is the proper response to the suffering of this world? Look how the prophets of old handled it. We say people who know how to suffer with aplomb are talented, gifted of God. Consider Job. His testing was inexplicable by God's Laws, but he remained faithful against all the lies of worldly men. It wasn't necessary for Job to offer up solemn ritual oaths that he was lawful; his record was established in Heaven. God knew. You don't need to worry over what men think, just commit yourself to honesty before God. Yes means yes and no means no.

So when you are suffering and feeling down, pray humbly for mercy. Jumping for joy? Lift up

your praises. Feeling sick? Let your elders know; it's their duty to attend to such needs with medicine and prayer. Notice how everything leads us back to prayer. It's not some sick joke to shut you up; prayer works better than any of us know, but we have to take it seriously. Elijah would be the first to tell you that he wasn't any better than the next man. Yet, when God was ready, his sincere prayer started a drought lasting three-and-a-half years, ending only when the same Elijah prayed for rain. It's all about the fruit of the Kingdom, not about the people involved.

Yet, the greatest miracle of all is turning people from sin and Elijah worked harder at that than any other thing. He would much rather have seen the people to whom he prophesied turn from sin and repent. If you can speak the truth and just one person repents, you have brought a dead soul to life and buried all their sins. That is a pretty big miracle!

1 Peter

1 Peter is also to primarily Jewish Christians, as Peter was the Apostle to them, while he and Paul agreed that the latter was sent to the Gentiles. He writes this first letter to those residing across the northern half of what is now Turkey. A great many folks from these areas heard Peter's first sermon at Pentecost. As best we can tell, he writes this from Rome, where he is working with Mark, who has been there for some time. Peter no doubt had some help, since he used translators often when addressing Greek-speaking crowds. We sense that Paul has been executed by the time of this letter, and this is late in time, shortly before Peter's own execution. This places things during the persecution of Nero.

Thus, the letter is mostly about facing a very certain and severe oppression, primarily because of their faith. Jews understood social rejection, but had seldom faced official government wrath during the Roman Era. Peter's instruction here simply points them to the example of Jesus, who faced danger from His government. It was a way unfamiliar to Jews in that time, the way of otherworldliness.

1 Peter 1

In standard form, Peter notes his identity and to whom the letter was written. These were Jewish Christians of the Diaspora who were also the Elect called to follow Christ. Then he follows with an extended blessing, as with most Greek correspondence in that day. He emphasizes the otherworldly focus of faith. We have an inheritance and destination outside this world. Everything we face on this earth is no worse than a passing nuisance. On the other hand, how we bear up under trials is the most precious treasure, our testimony among the lost souls. Our beloved Lord is not some mere human, but much more. He isn't likely to save our miserable hides, but He will surely take us home to be with Him when this life passes – not a moment too soon.

The ancient Hebrew prophets were genuinely puzzled about some of the messages they declared. There were Messianic visions of conquest mixed with horrific suffering. They realized all this was for some far later time, when a remnant of Israel would receive a spiritual birth. Angels were anxious to see it come about, waiting a long time to see this great miracle.

Peter warns them: Stop looking for an earthly deliverance! Commit yourselves to living like people of Heaven, which the grace of your Father will empower. Don't go back to the old foolish ways of the Talmud, living by mere human intelligence, but absorb into your being God's spiritual holiness. Live like children who know better than to disappoint Him. All of this sorrow is just a passing moment. You were ransomed by a price of blood, not material things; you were delivered from those things. It was the blood of the promised Messiah, the Son of God. He rose from the dead, and we aren't far behind.

The primary mark of His victory over your sins is how you love each other the same way He loved you all. He purchased a new heavenly birth for you. As the Scripture says, from Heaven's eternal perspective, human life isn't much longer than that of grass and flowers. But you received the ineffable eternal truth through the gospel message. If you absorbed that message, you will live eternally with the Messenger.

1 Peter 2

If we belong to the Heavenly Realm, then we should be quick to discard the ways of worldly power and the world's ways of dealing with discomfort. Peter notes that it is wholly inconsistent for us to engage in hatred, manipulation, theatrical false righteousness, envy and backstabbing defamation. These were common among Pharisees, of course, and the Talmud justified some of it. Against that, Peter appealed for his readers to cling to Scripture without that adulterating Hellenized approach. For Jewish Christians of the Diaspora, this would likely be something new for them. Like newly born children of the Spirit, they should suck it up greedily. Everyone who experiences spiritual birth is like that.

Jesus was God's living foundation of Truth, rejected by His own nation. We are called to lay down our lives as living stones, building a new Temple of the Spirit on that foundation. Israel was once a priestly nation, but rejected the calling. That mission has now passed to Christians as a spiritual kingdom, whose lives on earth embracing self-death are fit sacrifices for His spiritual temple. This was prophesied by Isaiah and David, that we should be precious to Him through His Son, and rejected by this world like His Son was. People who refuse the spiritual meaning of His Word consider Christ a hazard, His otherworldly calling a serious threat to their power grubbing ways.

So now the elect Nation of Priests is no longer Old Israel, but New Israel, those who follow Christ. Jewish Christians in particular have left behind the darkness of Judaism and now walk in the sunshine of God's Son. His own People are now all followers of Christ, or they are not His. Those who cling to the Talmud will neither find His grace, nor even His mercy under the Laws. It is ours by birthright.

Talmudic Jews and others made up foul rumors about Christians as depraved and lawless and many Roman authorities believed it. The whole thing was one big satanic plot to bring down the testimony of the saints. It's really almost impossible to counter such propaganda without resorting to the ways of those spreading it. Peter reminded his readers to avoid making the reputation of Our Savior any worse because they no longer belonged to this world. Better by far is to simply live righteously so that there is no evidence to support any slander.

Human governments have always come up with some crazy laws and policies, so a critical element in our testimony is cynically doing our best to obey them. Things were bad in Noah's day and we are heading back that way. So, God intends that we do what's lawful in His eyes so we can't fail to make governments look bad. Our freedom in the Spirit is not an excuse to rebel against human government, because it's not about rights and orthodoxy to political theories, but an opportunity to testify of His grace. Respond to evil with love and to bad government with serenity and respect. If anything, pity the poor fools who have only this life. We are much more concerned with what makes God happy and that means proper earthly honor even to those who don't much care what God thinks.

It's no different for Christians who are slaves. Roles are assigned to people in this world and we should play them as unto the Lord. Never mind how bad your master plays his role; you play yours to your Lord's glory. Tolerate abuse because this life is not worth much fuss. Taking your lumps for your mistakes isn't much of a testimony, but showing yourself stronger than unjust abuse is glorious. It's not as if any of us could claim the sinless perfection of Christ, who absorbed the most unjustified prosecution in human history. If there was anyone who really could have struck back, it was the Son of Heaven, but He didn't. Instead, He used it as an opportunity to show the truth and pay for our sins. You are now free from those sins, so live accordingly. He took the wounds for our healing. In a time when Jews neither knew nor cared for the real God, totally vulnerable to Hell's depredations because they embraced lies against Him, these Jewish believers heard the Shepherd's voice and returned, finding the salvation others thought was their birthright.

We have too much to do without sparing much concern for worldly politics and power.

1 Peter 3

We have no use for politics, whether in society or in the home. We belong to another world and another life; this is just a temporary opportunity to manifest that other life. Everything we do here must support it, not the other way around. While we are often deeply involved in the lives of others, particularly those with whom we share a household, we must not allow that connection to entangle us. We must keep our eyes on Christ. Our hands are engaged, but our hearts are elsewhere, and our engagement must serve that other world.

How does a wife act when she lives with her husband while belonging to Christ? Since she really has nothing in this life to lose, she has no burning need to correct her husband's flaws, no need to compete for her own little domain. All of that belongs to the Spirit. Hers is to manifest

the Spirit by following the husband's lead in partnership. If he asks, she would surely tell him whatever is on her heart, but she does not set about like the truth police trying to straighten him out. She also isn't all that interested in the latest fashions, competing with other women; she adorns her soul instead. She supports her husband in whatever he believes is the mission, just as Sarah did Abraham, whether she understands or not. Jewish women claimed to be daughters of Abraham, often with some arrogance, but that's not what a real daughter of Abraham is like.

The man of God is patient and tender with his wife. He keeps an eye on her needs. Such men aren't looking for any excuse to belittle her for not thinking like a man, but will accept graciously what support she knows how to offer. He knows he isn't perfect, either, so why should he expect it of her? He's very fortunate God has blessed him with a partner to help bear the load of serving the Kingdom.

People have their roles and there is a great harvest of peace and love waiting for those who seek ways to maximize their service in that role. You don't have to think and act alike, but you must have a singular shared commitment to making God look good. The mission separates those who shouldn't be together, so keep your eyes on the mission, not your brother or sister in the faith. There is no competition, nothing anyone can take from you except what you willingly surrender. Toss aside your pride, something Jews of the first century found very difficult. Peter quotes from the Psalms about watching your mouth and trying to get even. Everything the Jews believed they were seeking from God's hand was pretty easy to get if they could just learn to be humble and seek peace with others.

We all understand that governments and anyone with power in this world often ignore the Lord's standards. Just how important can they be, though, if they ignore God? Let them exercise their power, to include harming your body and your possessions, because they are simply arguing with God over things of little value to us. Tribulation and sorrow are the saint's natural ecology. The real child of God is calmly facing such things. Be ready to answer when asked to explain your conduct, but do not eagerly seek an excuse to demonstrate some imaginary moral superiority. We are all fallen. The best we can hope for is to be faithful with what God places upon us. We know that if we act better than the powers and authorities of this world, then we won't have to advertise the fact. People will see and know the difference. It's better to suffer with otherworldly peace and fortitude than get into an argument with a fool.

Our Savior suffered unimaginable injustice. That was His mission. It was the only way He could bring us out of this dead world into the Spirit Realm. It was by God's Spirit that He was manifested in the preaching of Noah in ancient times to the souls in prison, chained to this fallen existence. And how many repented at Noah's preaching? Just the eight who entered the Ark. The water was a symbol of their salvation, just as baptism is for us. It's not about washing the flesh; that's just a ritual. The flood washed away the sinners, but saved those who put faith in the Ark. We who embrace Christ are in the Ark, too, but those who remain attached to this world are just engaging in a dead ritual and will die in their delusions.

Our Lord is no longer here in the flesh, but reigns in Heaven. Every authority in Heaven and

earth are under His authority. Let's act like His servants should act.

1 Peter 4

Those who live for the other world are dead to this world. The lusts that lead to sin belong to the dead body of flesh, but we identify with the suffering of Christ on the Cross. That was our old life. We now live a new life, even if the bare facts of our earthly existence are the same as before. There is a very real difference, for in our fleshly pasts we walked in the same sins as all the heathens far too long. Peter is pointing out how being Jewish didn't prevent his readers indulging in the same basic sins. For all their peculiarities, Jews were still more familiar to the heathen Gentiles than Christians were. So, both Jews and Gentiles were rather hostile to the holy life of one who had nailed their flesh to the Cross of Christ.

Their time to face judgment will come. We can't waste concern over their evaluations of us, because we are all going to stand before God. A whole generation of believers had already passed, who received the gospel message on the basis of repenting before wrath fell. They are now resting in the Lord, having died in Kingdom service. Their testimony is there for all men to see. Their human lives are done, but their spiritual lives have just begun.

Though Peter writes in Greek, he expressed a Hebrew concept typically translated "is at hand." He writes prophetically: You can't possibly know the date and time for the end of this world, nor even your own personal end. Eternity is always a mere step away from us. From the Day of Ascension, it has always been just a step away in a certain sense, and it remains so. Thus, he encourages his readers to live with the expectation that their time here will end right in the middle of faithful service. No particular task itself is so sacred that it has to be finished before the Lord takes us away, literally or figuratively. Rather, the calling is sacred, and we should walk in that sacrificial love of the Cross, as it will bury all our sins and help us not to suffer from the sins of others.

Dealing with other humans is not a burden, but an opportunity. Welcome them into your life with open arms. What few gifts or talents you may possess are sufficient for sharing in His glory; don't envy the gifts of others. Rejoice that such gifts are yours through them. Let preaching be the actual Word of God, not your own analysis of things, which gave birth to the Talmud. Administrative folks can only do what they know how to do; let them avoid embellishing their role. This is not a synagogue where people jockey for position, but a place where one family in the Spirit seeks God's glory together.

The spiritual life is an affront to sinners, of course. We should hardly be surprised when simply minding our own business draws hostility from the world around us. Indeed, such hostility is a joy, a sharing in Christ and His glory. The fellow Jews they left behind were the same folks who blasphemed Christ, so for them to hate those who followed Christ was a blessing. Hold your head up high! Just make sure it's for His name you suffer and don't use it as an excuse to make trouble. That time of persecution from the Roman government served only to purify the church. God always pours wrath against sin on the church first, as a sort of warm up, but things really

get rolling by the time He moves on to the sins of others.

Consider: If we suffer some because we are learning to let go of our earthly dependencies so we can walk more spiritually, what is it like for those who are spiritually dead? When wrath is finished, they'll have nothing at all, because this plane of existence is all they have. Be brave in the face of persecution. It's not as if God is angry with you, only with your imperfections. Focus your attention on the spiritual, the otherworldly aspects of all this.

1 Peter 5

The Kingdom trade is sacrifice. We exchange this sacrificial love for souls salvaged from this dying world. So long as we keep our attention focused on this business, everything else takes care of itself. So we ensure this primary business of ours manifests in everything we do.

To the ruling elders of the Jewish churches to whom he writes, Peter appeals as a fellow elder. He also reminds them that he was there when Christ wept in the Garden, when He faced the kangaroo court, and then he watched the execution of the Savior. Peter saw that sacrifice up close and personal. He also saw the glory of the resurrected Lord and knew beyond all knowing how that glory will one day return to this earth. Peter stands on this ground as he appeals to the ruling elders to sacrifice in their care for the flock. The roles of elder and pastor are not so clearly cut as to forget that everyone who leads is a shepherd for at least that moment, walking in the footprints of the Good Shepherd. This is a powerful image of one who allows the sheep to wander at will across the pasture, keeping an eye from afar, acting only when there is real danger. Sheep do not pasture well all huddled together where they are easily controlled. Jews of the First Century were not known for leading with a light hand, but this was the nature of the calling for elders and pastors.

This wasn't simply a job, a career with promotion potential, but a blessed opportunity to give even more. A real shepherd leads by inspiring sacrifice, not by fleshly power and authority. What glory will it be if we lead the sheep as the Good Shepherd leads us!

Jews of that era had also nearly forgotten in their synagogues the noble calling of discipleship. They had absorbed the Westernized view of internship and apprenticeship, with degrees and privilege, not the same thing at all. A disciple is silent and busies himself with mundane tasks so as to free the elder to pay more attention to larger matters. He silently absorbs the words, actions and whole manner of his master. This is not to copy and emulate, but to understand in that part of the soul where words cannot bear the load and to find his own burning cause and calling for leadership in his turn.

So it is that the entire congregation strives to sacrifice more fully for each other, regardless of roles and titles. The privilege is in the service; Our Lord was the greatest Servant of all. We can be sure Peter never forgot the burning lesson behind Jesus washing his feet. Setting aside everything we think we have and think we are, we let God redefine our place in this world. Indeed, we hardly consider that place of any importance, because we are too eager to be in our

place in that Other Realm.

Eagerly seeking the chance to do good for others, we are sharp and attentive to their needs consistent with our calling. Satan is an old toothless lion, having only his roar and he hopes to inspire fear and petty selfishness, so that we lay down at his feet to be devoured. All of his roaring is mere noise and persecution is the same. Deafen yourself to it; pay no attention and remember someone in Christ somewhere near is surely suffering even worse. You'll need to be strong for them and with them. Before you know it, the tribulation will be past. If He doesn't call you home, He'll surely make you stronger in this life than the very foundations of the mountains themselves. Such is His power over all things in this world.

Peter closes, noting Silvanus (Silas) is the bearer of this letter and can be trusted as the very messenger of God. Those who receive the letter should not doubt that it comes from Peter, but embrace it, as they would Peter himself. He writes from Rome, cryptically referred to as Babylon, a common symbol used during the persecution. We note John used it, too. Of course, Mark was there, having already written his Gospel that he learned from Peter. We are hardly surprised when Peter calls him his son, a Hebrew term for one's better disciples. He counsels them to greet each other with the elaborate Eastern greetings too easily forgotten in Western lands.

2 Peter

This letter follows the first to the same audience by only a couple of years. It comes near the end of Nero's reign, circa AD 67. Experts tell us that the grammar is a bit different; we sense that Peter didn't have the same scribe and translator (Silas) to help him the second time. In the few years since his first letter, things in that region had changed quickly for the worse. There is full-blown heresy invading the churches through a collection of traveling teachers.

These teachers, ostensibly Jewish Christians, were likely former rabbis who had brought the whole of their Hellenism over to Christianity. Thus, we see the birth of Gnosticism, which was a short step away from Talmudic Judaism. We can scarcely separate the Judaizers from the Gnostics at this point. It's no longer simply a drive to recapture them for Judaism, but using similar teachings to capture faith itself, to make it a slave of human logic. We do not doubt that they were very entertaining speakers, hoping to make a living off heresies. By the very logic of marketing, they knew teaching the same old truths would not spark as much response as something new. "New" in this case was by definition a departure from the truth. It all sounded so reasonable. Peter warns it is also so deadly.

2 Peter 1

Peter opens by stating that he is the willing servant of Christ who appointed him as Apostle. He writes to those who have been granted no lesser faith, by virtue of the same right standing with

God Almighty, which was Christ's to grant as He wished. Thus, they were as equally chosen as Peter.

The customary blessing at the start of all Greek correspondence emphasizes the immeasurable richness of walking in Christ. Every yearning of the human soul is answered in the enlightenment and discernment of which God and His Son are. Having once tasted this miracle of spiritual awakening, nothing on the human plane of existence can compare. The words of any language break down under the burden of trying to express such a lavish gift. That is precisely the point: We have been permitted to gain citizenship in something far above this plane and have escaped the living death of this world.

Peter immediately plunges into encouragement based on this very powerful transformation in our natures. He offers a chain of spiritual development that follows the logic of that Heavenly Realm. We first commit ourselves to this gospel message. Based on such a commitment, we should be bold in making it known to others that we belong to something different. We boldly apply that divine enlightened nature to discern what's real from God's perspective. Using something persistently and consistently leads to competence, so that we deftly beat our fleshly nature at every turn. Soon, it's easy to wait on God to do things at His pace, because we always have plenty to occupy us. We begin to look like His Son; we rejoice at the sight of our fellow Christians. From this it is but a short step to the sacrificial love by which we conquer the whole world of sin around us.

This progression was not some simple scheme of promotion in ranks, nor even a simple repeating cycle. It was a bigger whole broken down for emphasis, so that the mind can grasp what it must do to implement what is always going on all at the same time. The only problem is staleness, because not progressing is dying, slipping back into the sins we all left behind. We can't afford to get hung up on analyzing things to death, as was the habit of Talmudic scholars. While our calling and election are eternal, our own sense of power depends entirely on nailing it all down in our hearts. This closes the door on sin, which is no longer an option in your life. It makes the portal of Heaven loom large in our vision as too precious to miss.

Did his readers not know these things? Of course they did, but Peter could not bring himself to shut up about the truth so long as he remained on this plane of existence. He knew it was not much longer at the time he wrote this and that the personal prophecy Jesus gave him regarding his end was very close to realization. He was seeking to provoke their memories continuously even after he was gone.

The truth of the gospel would easily outlive the Apostles. This was not some wild mythology carefully concocted by scholars to manipulate and grow rich, as the Judaizers alleged. The Twelve had been there, seeing all the events in the gospel accounts up close and personally. Peter was there at the Transfiguration and heard the declaration from Heaven that Jesus was the Son of God. This was more than enough to establish the teaching of Jesus as Ultimate Truth from God's own mouth. Peter encouraged them to cling to something only their spirits could see for now, until the moment when they saw it literally on That Day. The prophetic word did

not arise in the human intellect, but from somewhere much higher. It smote the awareness of the prophets from their hearts, where spoke the Holy Spirit of God.

2 Peter 2

Peter offers a rich description of the false teachers. He first connects them to the false prophets in the Old Testament. From the beginning of time, whenever the Lord calls prophets, for every true prophet it seems there are a dozen fakes. So it is with the false teachers of Peter's day.

Today we recognize these folks as Gnostics, among other labels. Taking an extreme position on the doctrine of Two Realms, they denied that Christ could be both God and man. In their Hellenized logic, this was unacceptable, even incomprehensible. Thus, He was one or the other. In a revival of Platonism, they decided that if Jesus were divine, He would have been a mere phantom, leaving no footprints in the sand. If He were man, then everything He said was subject to debate because He could not be God. Thus, they fail the one significant test of orthodoxy that the Son of God came in the flesh.

But if that's not enough, their debauched lifestyle should be the only clue anyone needs. This lifestyle was a common result of their logic. In their minds, the spirit and flesh do not touch each other, so if your spirit is redeemed, it matters not at all what your flesh does. With teaching like this, in no time at all the churches would be rightly called bawdy houses and Christ's name would be blasphemed. Even on the fleshly level, the Laws of God apply until there is no flesh left alive. These teachers would be among the first to be destroyed in their flesh.

Beginning with the highest order of created beings, in terms of their power, Peter notes that angels were punished for lawlessness. Nor did God spare any of the entire human race in the Flood, with the exception of Noah and his household. He describes how Lot was disturbed by the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, that his household alone survived the destruction. These false teachers did not understand that the only reason Christians are not bound under God's Laws is because they hold to an even higher code of conduct, as Jesus taught the Laws of God were more strict than those of Moses.

A part of the Jewish Talmudic mythology was insulting Satan and the demons, asserting things simply not true. It is possible to blaspheme Satan, too. Even the archangels of God would not do that; their authority rested on God's truth and proper respect for authorities. These teachers had no comprehension of such things, having thrown away even the common sense God granted to the rest of fallen mankind. So, they reject all authorities placed by God in Heaven and earth and reject all restraints, shamefully carousing in broad daylight. Then they had the nerve to sit in on the First Century Love Feasts, perverting the whole concept by keeping an eye out for their next sexual conquest among the women of the church. Even Balaam, who taught the Moabites how to seduce Israel and earn the wrath of their God, recognized the authority of God spoken through his own onager. These filthy false teachers respect no one and nothing but their own lusts.

There is a special place in Hell for men who work so hard to cultivate the fine art of public speaking and persuasion solely for the purpose of defrauding new believers. They offer the false freedom of libertine living, the very chains new Christians have just escaped. What you serve is your master. It would be better if these folks had never come to Christ, than that their whole Christian experience should be tainted with sins worse than those they left behind. Peter writes this because we all know true spiritual birth demands repentance. A great many new seekers are not necessarily yet spiritually alive, only enamored with this new experience. If they are steered wrong first thing by some Gnostic heretic, whatever they may have gained is lost, likely forever. This certainly characterizes those smooth-tongued devils teaching heresy, who were no better than dogs or swine when it comes to understanding holiness.

2 Peter 3

We are in the Last Days. What that phrase originally meant was that God has no unfinished business to complete before this fallen existence is terminated and His Son returns.

Peter notes that he has written this second letter to ensure his readers are mentally ready for what is coming. Minds that have been healed from the deadly imaginations of human thinking don't need teaching, merely encouragement to cling to their divine purpose: to serve the Spirit. What was it the Old Testament prophets warned us? What did Christ teach His Apostles? These Last Days would be filled with attacks against the truth. Those false teachers were no different from the rest of the human race, seeking to feed their own lusts. People always sought excuses for denying God's Laws. This was the real motive for mocking the promise of His Return.

So they denied that Jesus was coming back. Had anything changed since Creation itself? Yes, it had. Peter points out that the Flood destroyed the entire human race, all but a handful of people. The Flood came simply on the basis of His Laws, never mind spiritual matters. That was an entirely different sort of world, which had not yet received much of His revelation, yet He held them accountable. Since then, we've had the Nation of Israel and the Son of God with all the Scriptures recording the meaning of those events. So, any future judgment will be the Final Judgment. Noah prophesied of doom and his audience mocked and waited 120 years for his prophecies to come true. Did that seem long? God is not here with us inside the fallen realm of time. As easily as we move our hands through the three dimensions of space, God moves His hand across the dimensions of time itself. Whatever excuse there might have been for those before the Flood, there is no excuse now, so the only reason for a delay is God's patience in dealing with a far greater culpability after the revelation of His Son.

No human mind is capable of estimating when He will return. What a day it will be, that Final Day! Everything you see in the sky above you, the whole universe, will simply disappear with such a noise that no one living will mistake what it is. Indeed, the earth under our feet and everything we know will dissolve in a blaze. It could be any moment, utterly disconnected from any omens on this human plane. So, what does it take for us to remain ever ready for that moment? One does not take a vacation from holiness.

We cannot imagine what a vast and dramatic change it will be, this New Heaven and New Earth. It will be of a divine character. If we want to be ready, we need to practice that divine character within ourselves. Paul himself has written extensively about this Return of Christ. Who can understand such things? Those determined to walk in the flesh have twisted his words as they have all other Scriptures. Don't follow them. Don't forget how your minds have been kicked off the throne and made to serve the Spirit of God in your spirits. Fundamental issues have already been decided before they come to your brain, so thinking is merely a matter of implementing the truth revealed.

The mind of fallen man, the human intellect, presumes to judge God as little more than an arrogant human who holds His power over us unfairly. Seeking to throw off His Laws as oppressive, such minds keep seeking opportunity to unchain sinful desires. They assume God is bound under our sense of time. If Jesus were coming back, it makes no sense to them that He would have waited this long. Thus, they cast off all moral restraint and dream up their own convenient morality. We know this whole Fallen Realm is one big lie. We should not mistake God's patience for weakness, but realize that this is our chance to get up to speed on the holiness that characterizes the Other Realm.

Peter closes by inviting them to grow in grace, which means doing a better job of resurrecting the Savior in our bodies. That's where the real *gnosis* takes place.

1 John

1 John was penned late in the first century, perhaps around AD 85. Ephesus had become the center of gravity for Christian faith. We know John stayed in Jerusalem for a time to keep Jesus' command to adopt His mother Mary. Sometime after her death, John was driven out of town by the warfare attached to the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70. While the church in Syrian Antioch continued as the eastern capital of faith, Ephesus seemed to draw a very large number of Christians. They would have naturally spread out to nearby communities. As John was the last living Apostle in the region, his leadership in Ephesus brought a great deal of Christian attention there.

Sadly, it was also the hotbed of the greatest heresies. We are aware of two prominent threads, both of which are characteristic of the immorality hosted by the Temple of Diana, a brothel in the name of religion. The Nicolaitans claimed to arise from following the Elder Nicolas of the first church in Jerusalem, one of the so-called Seven Hellenistic Deacons. Most likely, the cult simply misinterpreted some things he had said. About all we know of this short-lived sect was their libertine lifestyle. They were not much different in conduct from the cult led by Cerinthus. He was the most infamous of those who blended Talmudism with Christian teaching, the first full-blown Gnostic on record. His was an extreme Dualism. He embraced the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, but insisted that Christ was a spirit who worked with Jesus the man, departing prior to the crucifixion. His teaching is an example of what happens when human

logic is allowed to disregard clear revelation from God. He insisted that flesh was inherently evil, so could do what it pleased without affecting the spirit. John encouraged his readers to avoid this pernicious doctrine.

1 John 1

John remained substantially a Hebrew man. Indeed, he was the image of Hebrew manhood, rather like the character of the shepherd – gentle to his flock and deadly to any threat. Thus, we do not have a Greek style of correspondence, but John comes out firing prophetically. He immediately unloads the primary distinction between truth and all sorts of lies about Christ.

The whole message of Christ is founded on one verifiable fact: Jesus Christ came in the flesh. It's a wonder John does not mention here that this is his very own cousin and best friend from his youth. Still, he sticks to the basic facts: He was co-eternal with the Father and He was entirely real and physical, a living artifact on this plane of existence. He was from birth the ultimate revelation of God Almighty for living on this earth, and teaching how to outlive it, too. The reason John bothered to tell anyone is because that sort of Life cannot be contained; it must be shared. It was the very Life of God Himself, shared down to us through His Son. Since John and his friends were there, literally touching this Person who was also God, John certainly had no doubts and needs no esoteric reasoning to understand.

Surely the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding district knew all this, but John was reminding them in the face of constant pressure from the liars. Cling to the truth and reaffirm it often, because it sets your life on fire.

Our Father is the definition of Light, of enlightenment and truth. This was the message from Jesus. There is perhaps one sliver of truth in the Gnostic teaching that God could not compromise with sin. So, why would people claim to fellowship with Him, and then compromise with the lusts of the flesh? People who don't cling to holiness with a singular desire are lying when claiming communion with His Spirit. God revealed Himself primarily in the form of His commands for holiness in the flesh. There was this thing called "repentance" from our sins on a fleshly level that permitted us access to spiritual life. We claim the cleansing of repentance on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross; He was the Passover Lamb. If there is no repentance, then there is no cleansing and there is no Life or Light.

There is no requirement for esoteric logical reasoning. God commanded repentance. That's because He was not pleased with human sin. If we argue with that, we cannot claim any particle of truth. If we confess our sins and our fallen nature, only then do we stand in the place of His cleansing. Without that cleansing, no part of your being can fellowship with Him, ever. Claiming no need for repentance is arguing with God, a blatant rejection of His divine truth.

John thus obliterates the Dualism upon which Gnosticism depended. Yes, there are two realms, but they are joined in the human soul. Jesus was quite literally the Son of God, a man of flesh and divinity. Illogical that may be, but it was what God Himself thundered from heaven in

John's own ears.

1 John 2

We live in the Land of Repentance, the homeland of all men whose spirits are born from above. John seems to be mocking the pompous superiority of the Gnostics by reverting to a good schoolboy grammar here, as he deftly expresses deep spiritual concepts to those who know better than to think so much of themselves. John reminds the children of Heaven that the whole point of his ministry is to drive them to holiness; he'd rather they not sin at all. Knowing we can't do that on this side of Eternity, we never forget that our advocate is the very Lamb of God, the sacrifice that paid for all human sin. People who aren't penitent about their fallen natures have no claim on spiritual life.

What does the Spirit-born man act like? He obeys his Father. Claiming that higher nature means nothing if you don't act the part. The power to overcome sin is a fundamental proof of partaking of God's nature. This is our assurance of communion with Him. Indeed, we need look no further than the gospel stories of Jesus, with His sinless life driving Him all the way to Cross. Do Gnostics and Nicolaitans nail their old fleshly lives to the Cross?

From the beginning of Creation, God's expectations for us have not changed. Man was designed to commune with God, to obey Him reflexively. Yes, we fell, so He revealed Himself through various expressions in covenants and edicts, offering the way back to Him. Yet, there is freshness to this new covenant in His Son, because once and for all darkness has been defeated. The victorious light of God is manifested chiefly in our sacrificial love for each other, just as Jesus told us the night before His death. If someone claims to have any part of Christ's Spirit, let him demonstrate that kind of love. If you can embrace that sort of love, then truly your behavior will please God. People who hate are so blinded that they can't even understand what light means.

So, John writes to those Heaven-born who live in the Land of Repentance, who manifest His glory by escaping sin's power. He writes to them as if they were old men, because they have inherited the ancient faith. He writes to them as vigorous men of war who do battle daily against the Evil One. He writes to them as obedient children of the Heavenly Father. Is there anything new in all this? No, it's the same sort of thing he has written from the beginning of his ministry among them, like old men who carried the ancient treasure of knowing the Fall and promise from the days of the Garden. It was the same message he gave them to encourage holding fast that ancient word of truth that gave them the power to fight Satan. The result is they don't love any part of this world, unlike the greedy and lustful Gnostics and Nicolaitans. God's kind of sacrificial love does not move men to sacrifice holiness and keep the pleasures of this world.

John refers to the ancient Hebrew trinity of the flesh: the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Intellect, and the Pride of Self-rule. God did not give these things; they are the curse of the Fall. This world will be destroyed, along with the lusts anchored here. People who forsake such lusts

will not be trapped here when it goes.

We, as Children of God, know that this is the Last Age. After Christ, there is no new revelation from God. We were warned to expect the Spirit of Antichrist and we have seen quite a few Antichrists. They could not have come before that final revelation of Christ; that's how we know there is nothing left before The End. Nor should we be surprised that these Antichrists come out of the churches. They never were part of us and their distance from us simply proves that. All things in good time. Even when our minds are puzzled, our spirits understand. There was nothing new in what John wrote in this letter, but it would be meaningless to those whose spirits remained dead. How people react to this letter should help indicate something.

The primary test of the Spirit's presence is lifting up Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus was the Son of God; deny Him and you deny the Father. John warned them not to be suckered by these supposed new teachings, but cling to the message that first brought them together in the Lord. We were promised an eternal existence on the grounds of repentance and embracing Christ. John noted a whole generation has come and gone since that message walked on the earth in human form and nothing had changed, so ignore these filthy libertines. They brought a teaching of human invention, something resulting from the very Fall itself. The gospel speaks to the spirit. Only a living spirit raised up by God understands it, while these wild teachings appeal only to the intellect.

So, live a holy life as the Spirit-born, which won't leave you standing in shame when Jesus returns. He is the very definition of righteousness, so follow His example and live righteously.

1 John 3

John celebrates the inexpressible privilege of being called Children of God. Of course, the world does not tolerate God's dominion, and it cannot tolerate anyone who embraces that dominion. Perhaps it only takes a hint of holiness to stir their hatred, since most of us have barely begun to resemble Him. The full transformation awaits the final revelation of Our Lord when He returns. Upon seeing Him, we shall all become like Him, whatever that would be. This very hope is what compels us to holiness. We can't wait for our lives to be cleaned up. For now, we can practice as much as possible being like Him.

John uses a form of Greek verb that does not translate well into English. When he refers to sin, it is *habitual* sin. As he explains, carelessness about righteousness is foreign to the Spirit-born. First, it is the equivalent of injustice, of a lawless streak that rejects divine authority. The whole point of Christ's life was showing the way to escaping the power of sin. His death paid the price to set us free from the penalty. Had He been anything less than perfectly sinless, it would have been impossible. So, whomever has received that Resurrection Life cannot remain comfortable with sin. The one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness reflects the presence of His Spirit.

Satan gave birth to sin in God's creation. Jesus came and dissolved the power of that intrusion. So people who received that spiritual birth are permanently changed and the Presence of

Almighty God remains in them. They come under conviction, can't find peace, when they let some sin keep them under Satan's authority. It's utterly unnatural.

John shows the unbreakable linkage between righteousness and the characteristic sacrificial love of Christ in His followers. While we easily understand how our modern world fails the standards, we can only surmise that it was a primary feature of the heretical teachings this letter addresses. Likely, both the Gnostics and the Nicolaitans indulged in the sins of hatred, particularly against Christians. Stirring bitterness against those who object to radical change is a primary mark of cults. Seeking to seduce people away from a strong faith requires suggesting that the balky faithful are worthy of despise for rejecting such a "marvelous enlightenment" as the heretics were selling.

Jesus Himself raised the issue at the Last Supper, calling it the New Covenant in His Blood. His one command was that we should love one another as He loved us, a truth preceding the most ancient written Scripture. The heretics were more like Cain, who slew Abel, simply because Abel made him look bad. Of course, the whole world is like Cain and these heretics were altogether worldly. They could not bear a desire for righteousness or any inclination to warmth and tenderness with each other. What they called sentimental weakness we call divine power. People who can hate without guilt are spiritually dead.

What does love look like? It would certainly include the irresistible urge to help our brothers and sisters with physical needs. We picture the heretics walking by on the other side of the street to avoid having to notice. It's not enough to toss a few coins in the beggar's cup, as the Judaizers taught, but we must care enough to stay involved and solve the underlying problems as family members. We who belong to Heaven know how to handle failure, because we never forget our own failings. We know Our Father can make a perfect heart, prodding us to depart from sin until we have peace with Him. In His peace, it's so easy to know what to pray for and how to ask, because we understand the blessings of His Laws. But His highest Law of all is embracing the sacrificial love of Christ.

It isn't hard to discern a heretic, because he always betrays some vice for which he is impenitent.

1 John 4

Unless the Spirit of God comes and breathes life into the dead spirit of a man, there is no place for the Spirit to dwell in him. Critical for John's congregations was counteracting the bold lies of these heretical teachers, who were marked primarily by an unchanged heart. We cannot afford to mistake emotions or intellect for the presence of the Spirit. When it gets hard to tell, simply note what they say of the Incarnation in Christ. The Spirit of Christ isn't going to attack His own manifestation. The Holy Spirit exists to glorify the Son, because He is the Spirit of Christ. There can be all kinds of spirits that might question this, but it would surely include the spirit of Antichrist. He animates an awful lot of people today, just as in John's day.

It's not hard to dismiss their lies, however sweet the presentation or however fascinating their logic. They belong to this world, while we belong to another, greater world. People who listen to such nonsense are hearing with the flesh. Theirs is the world that is passing away. These are the people who cannot embrace the message of Jesus Christ. Only a living spirit filled with the Holy Spirit can leap across eternity to the truth that makes no sense to dead spirits. You can't argue dead people into Life.

Yet, an even more substantial difference is how the people of the world love versus the people of Heaven. God is the very definition of love, because He sacrificed His own Son. Who else has ever willingly died for His enemies? It is the Spirit of His Son He places in our newly born spirits to make us His children. The power to love as much as Christ did can only come from His Presence. Falling short of that sacrificial love means something less than God is present. This is also a reliable indicator of His Spirit, the one key indicator of our union with Him.

So, we have this confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the one and only Divine Man. But an even greater indicator is His power to love manifested in a man's character. Jesus was many things to many people, but even when He was rude, it was never hateful. He always sought to make an opening to receive His love. Love is not simply feelings and smarts, but is the power to exert oneself for the welfare of another, as God defines that welfare. People who love like that cannot be made to fear much. They can absorb the same punishment that fell on Christ. Indeed, they must share it, in the sense of crucifying their old self. We can hold forth His love because He already paid the awful price to share it with us.

These heretics spoke of loving God, yet somehow managed to exhibit a willingness to mistreat Christians. If you can't love God when He manifests Himself in your brother, how can you claim to love Him at all? You aren't going to meet Him in person on this plane of existence, only through His children. That's what Jesus meant when He commanded the Twelve that they should love each other as He loved them.

1 John 5

The claim that any human can also be God, as Christ was, is so audacious that the mind reels. Only the power of spiritual birth can burn that truth into your heart, overcoming the objections of human logic and understanding. By the same token, you simply cannot love God without the Son, because if He is not raised in your spirit, you cannot even know God, much less love Him.

John reaffirms that the love born of the Spirit creates a desire in the heart to obey God's Laws. Such a desire defines holiness for us and builds the confidence to face everything this world throws at us. This is completely backwards from the message of the Talmudic legalism, which served only to hinder action out of fear. Our overpowering conviction of His favor is all we need and it's only available in Jesus. His ministry began with His baptism in the Jordan. While it did not end at the Cross, it rests entirely on the power of His blood. Without that, there could be no Spirit dwelling in our spirits. Without the Spirit, it is simply not possible to know the truth of things; there is no ability to see beyond the symbols.

It is not possible to denigrate Jesus Christ without blaspheming the Father and rejecting the Spirit; they are One. The basic Laws still stand so long as the earth does, but any claim to spiritual awareness begins with Christ. Without Christ, the whole of the Old Testament is meaningless. John wrote this letter simply to remind those who already knew the truth, because they already had a spiritual birth.

This spiritual birth is our confidence to come before God with any sort of request. The door is always open to us. It remains possible for any believer to become a sucker for false teachings and that same confidence before God allows us to pray effectively for them. Of course, some people become so locked into self-destruction that there isn't much anyone but God can do. We can't know what's going on inside them; to all appearances, they exhibit no spiritual awareness, no spiritual life. We pray for them like any sinner. You can't pray for them as you would a fellow Christian, but we have a duty to pray for things we do understand.

We live in the assurance that Children of Heaven tend to avoid sin and folly because the Lord builds a preference for His ways. Satan cannot own us again. We belong to Christ; the world belongs to the Devil. We have no use for worldly wisdom, but cling to the Son who guides us into His truth. This guidance will help us avoid anything resembling idolatry and spiritual compromise. Don't trust the things of this world.

2 & 3 John

These are two letters of the same sort to different individuals. Both of these people were well known in their own context as sponsors of traveling preachers and missionaries. The first is an unnamed lady of high standing and the second is Gaius, whom tradition says was senior pastor at Pergamon. The letters were sent at roughly the same time as 1 John and are abbreviated restatements of similar content.

Late in John's life, there were a number of preachers and teachers traveling between churches or extending the work into new areas. Most of them went in full faith, carrying only what they had and precious little that God did not supply on the way. Unlike those whom John castigated as fakes, these would never make much of their supposed position in order to collect material goods, but gratefully accepted what came to them from the generosity of others. Thus, it was a significant ministry to host these traveling preachers. At about the same time he wrote the church to warn of false Gnostic and Talmudic teachers, he also sent these two personal notes to rather prominent hosts of many genuine preachers.

While John used symbolic phrases more than any New Testament author, there is nothing in 2 John to indicate that this was anyone but some unnamed prominent woman of means. The whole message is very personal. After John's typical terse opening, he notes that her sons were a good testimony in themselves. He then warns her to be careful about whom she allows to stay in her home, indicating that she should converse with these people and find out what they

teach. If it departs from what she knows is good teaching, she should turn them away. This way she can avoid sharing in their sins.

To Gaius, John notes that his church is famous for their generous support of the traveling preachers. These preachers are careful to accept no gifts from pagan sources, unlike the Gnostics, but would rather do without if it does not come from fellow believers.

He then warns of a certain Diotrephes, who is trying to build a personal empire in the church. This man contradicts John's instructions and would be called before the congregation when John came to visit. Not only does this fellow turn away John's fellow workers, but also threatens ostracism of those who welcome them. Gaius is not to support this man. As a contrast, Demetrius – probably the messenger carrying this letter – is a good example of someone who serves in truth.

Both of these letters simply help to show the extent of the problem John had with Gnostics and other heretics. It's no wonder his other writings hint he felt a great darkness descending over the world, a time of tribulation for all the followers of Christ.

Jude

In yet another letter addressing the evil of Gnosticism, we find this brother of Elder James and half-brother of Jesus Christ had become quite the well-read scholar. Written sometime after Peter's letters, but perhaps a while before John's on the same subject, we have a strong polemic against heresy written for some unknown audience. We can safely assume that it was mostly Jewish, because Jude cites external, non-canonical Hebrew literature to illustrate his points. Mostly he characterizes the Gnostics, rather than describes their heresies.

Jude identifies himself, but does not identify his readers. Then he launches into a powerful attack against the Gnostic heretics. He had been planning to offer some lengthy discussion of his half-brother's teachings, but that task was diverted by the utter necessity of pointing out a dangerous heresy. He refers to the teachers of this nasty stuff as infiltrators who had completely missed out on spiritual birth and were marked for damnation long ago. They can be identified by their perverting of the gospel message into an excuse for lascivious conduct and by denying that Jesus was the human Son of God.

Neither the lawless complainers of the Exodus, nor the fallen angels were destroyed. Just so, these Gnostics are permitted to live. It took quite awhile before the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah fell, too. All of these are symbolic of the Gnostic heretics. His point is that they are arguing with God about the order of things. Their heresy twists the Two Realms as an excuse to pursue human lusts. Even Archangel Michael knew his place when disputing with Satan over the body of Moses. Satan was hoping to use it as a fake magic talisman to distract the Israelites. Jude compares these teachers to Cain for his shame against Abel, noting also that they would have joined the Rebellion of Korah. In each case, the sinners were rejecting God's established

order of things.

They were like hateful blots showing up at love feasts, storm clouds with wind and lightning, but no rain. They were all froth and noise, stars falling from the sky in a brief flash that ends in nothingness. Jude refers to the same oral sources from which we have today's Book of Enoch, how so soon after the Fall, the ancient patriarch warned that the Lord would return to judge the likes of these Gnostics in the company of His true believers. These Gnostics talked a good game, but talk was all they had.

Jude cites a warning from Jesus that there would be liars during this last Age of the Church. You can pick them out by their moral weakness and their psychopathic lack of sorrow for it. Jude warns his readers to further distinguish between those who are caught in a single mistake versus those who struggle with everything. None of us is free from sin, so we should always keep an eye on our own selves.

The letter is closed with a gracious hymn of benediction, recalling how God alone gives the power to overcome sin.