



The Book of Hebrews: Part 3 of 4 *Lecture Video Transcription*

By Dr. D.A. Carson
Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

This is a long complicated interlocked book, and we could easily spend far more hours than we have to devote to it, even to gain a superficial appreciation. But if you follow the outline that I provided for you on Moodle... After Jesus and the Sabbath rest, [Hebrews] 3:7–4:13, there is this long section that I’ve called, “Jesus, the Great High Priest,” from 4:14–7:28, the end of chapter 7. And embedded in the midst of that, is a warning, perhaps one of the most famous warning apostasy passages in the New Testament.

Before we turn to that passage on which we’ll spend a fair bit of time, I want to direct your attention to the first substantial “Jesus the Great High Priest” passage at the end of chapter 4. I’m not going to say much about it, because I want to deal much more with a high priest theme when we get to chapter 7. But, notice the interlocking things that come together:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest – 4:14 – who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Now, the notion of Jesus, the High Priest, keeps recurring and recurring and recurring. And the grounding of it in Old Testament Scripture is really found in chapter 7, to which we’ll turn in a few minutes. But, when it shows up, it often picks up some elements of the theme that have already been introduced, and then adds one more. So here, high priesthood is being tied to Jesus the Son of God, and that’s developed further in chapter 5, verses 5 and following. “Jesus the Son of God;” the Son of God theme is tied then not only to Jesus’ kingship, but also to his high priestly ministry. He enters into both together in consequence of the resurrection. But, sometimes the writer introduces the theme, knowing he’s going to develop it later. And you wonder just how the flow is running until you see the development get unpacked. And in this case, Jesus the High Priest, as an appointed person by God is developed in the next chapter.

But the particular detail here that I want to direct your attention to is one that is never developed at great length anywhere in this epistle, but is referred to often. That is, the fact that he is high priest ought to be an encouragement to us in a variety

of ways. “We do not have a high priest,” verse 15, “priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence.” Now that’s worth stopping for a moment to think about, because, at the end of the day, I suspect that many of us have thought, perhaps not very analytically, but just sort of intuitively, that temptation for Jesus couldn’t have been all that bad. That is, he’s the Son of God for goodness sake. Presumably, at some deep level, it’s impossible for him to sin; in fact, the history of the Church has defended the doctrine of impeccability of Christ—that is, that he could not sin. But for us, temptation is bound up with the fact that we have huge potential for falling. So what does temptation look like to him? And there it’s hard to be sure because the Scriptures don’t give us a sort of psychological profile of the matter, and yet it affirms in a variety of ways that he was tempted in all matters as we are. When you turn to the temptation narratives, Matthew 4 and Luke 4, well, I mean no insult, but it’s hard to apply those things directly to us. I’ve never been tempted to turn a piece of stone into a loaf of bread. I’ve never been tempted to jump off a high pinnacle of the temple. So, you start asking, what exactly does temptation look like in the case of Christ? Now, in the case of the temptation narratives, they’re beyond the scope of this book, but it is worth thinking about this: who is tempted more, the person who is tempted and resists, tempted and resists, tempted and resists, tempted and resists, and then gives in? Or the person who is tempted and resists, and tempted and resists, and tempted and resists, and tempted and resists, and never gives in? One of the reasons why we find it so easy to fall into sin is because we’ve fallen into that sin before. But maybe there is more pull if you never have.

In any case, this theme has, in the past, been tied to many, many great hymns of the faith, and many, many wonderings of how Christ empathizes with us in our need. One of the great ones was by Michael Bruce, penned in 1764:

Where high the heavenly temple stands,
The house of God not made with hands,
A great high priest our nature wears,
The patron of mankind appears.

He who for men their surety stood,
And poured on earth His precious blood,
Pursues in Heaven His mighty plan,
The Savior and the friend of man.

Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother’s eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our fellow sufferer yet retains
A fellow feeling of our pains:

And still remembers in the skies
His tears, and agonies, and cries.

In every pang that rends the heart,
The Man of Sorrows had a part,
He sympathizes with our grief,
And to the sufferer sends relief.

With boldness, therefore, at the throne,
Let us make all our sorrows known;
And ask the aid of heavenly power
To help us in the evil hour.

Now that picks up the theme here spectacularly well. And I have not seen a contemporary hymn that has picked that up, but it's a big theme in Hebrews.

Nevertheless, I'm going to press on for want of time to the warning that follows, the embedded warning. Now, it's set within a context in which the author berates the readers for not being more mature, he tells them at the end of [chapter] 5 and beginning of 6, that by this time, they ought to be teachers. In other words, the writer expects believers to grow in grace and in knowledge and eventually come to the place where they can pass on the faith and teach Scripture, and so on, to other people. That is the normal way the Church progresses in discipleship. But, he says, they still need milk rather than strong food, they're still abysmally immature. Now I'd love to run through what these elementary things are that he's talking about. We'll skip it and come right to 6:4—"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted of the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace,"—and then we'll press on to the later verses. What does that mean?

There are numerous positions taken on this passage. Let me outline a handful of them. Some argue that what is lost is not salvation, but service. So that if you commit some act of gross indecency when you are in pastoral ministry, it's not that you lose your salvation, but you may be excluded from pastoral leadership ever again. The difficulty is, it's very hard to tie that interpretation to the language of the text. The language of the text is far more severe. Moreover, if you look at the parallel in Hebrews chapter 10, the language is more frightening yet. In other words, this interpretation sounds just too much like a copout from a hard passage. There may be ways in which you lose your credibility if you do commit sin in ministry, and thus you fall under the sanctions of the pastoral epistles that insist an elder, pastor, overseer must have a good reputation, for example. Fair enough, but it's difficult to see that that's what this passage is talking about. This passage is talking about something far more dreadful. Then there are others who take a classic Arminian view: you can be saved and then lost, you lose your salvation; that is what they say

apostasy means and the listing of all of those qualifications—“tasted of the power in the age to come,” and so forth—all of this sounds like the person is a genuine believer. And, thus it is possible to lose your salvation. The best defender of that, in recent times, is the new commentary by Gareth Lee Cockerill, in the NICNT series. It’s a very good commentary on many, many fronts and he holds to a consistent Arminian line right through the commentary. And there are some people who argue, were it not for other passages in Scripture which seem to argue for the preservation of the saints, the perseverance of the saints, this would be the most normal interpretation of this passage. And I’m always a bit nervous about from running away from the most obvious interpretation of a passage. Nevertheless, I don’t think it’s the most obvious interpretation of the passage. Partly because before you read chapter 6, you’re supposed to read chapter 3. So if you’ve read chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and then 6, surely that should reorientate your thinking a bit in chapter 6. And in chapter 3, we’ve seen, especially verse 6 and verse 14, we are told in a variety of ways that a true Christian is one who, by definition, sticks. “You have become partakers of Christ. You have come to share in Christ if you hold the beginning of your confidence steadfastly to the end.” Now if that is taken seriously, then there’s a part of you that wants to argue, wait a minute. But if, by definition, a Christian is someone who has the grace to stick, to persevere, then how can this verse mean losing your salvation? Nevertheless, the Arminian position is probably the most popular one in many, many circles. It’s to be distinguished from a further tweak on it, where you can be saved and lost, and saved and lost, and saved and lost, and saved and lost. There are some Christian denominations that argue that. In fact, there’s an old joke on that, one you probably know. Tulip is supposed to be the flower of Calvinists, I’m sure you know the acronym. What’s the flower for Arminians? And then the joke is, it’s the daisy, he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me... a terrible joke. And in any case, it’s not the classic Arminian position, because there are only two petals—that is to say he loves me, he loves me not—that’s it. Because whatever else this passage is saying, regardless of what is lost here, you can’t get it back, it is impossible to restore such a one back. That’s what the text says, and Hebrews chapter 10 makes this even clearer.

But there are other options. In recent times, Tom Shriner and one or two others have argued that this passage guarantees there are no apostates. That is, it is talking about losing your salvation, but it is so effective that, in fact, people are warned away from it if they really are the Lord’s, and in consequence, the set of apostates is always empty. And that explains, they say, what the text says next. Verse 9, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work,” and so on and so on and so on. So they say there is a warning, but precisely because it is an effective warning, therefore it turns out that there is no one who actually falls away. And that has gained a certain amount of traction in some Reformed circles in the last couple of decades. But with the best will in the world, I think it is intrinsically illogical. That is to say, the more you hold this interpretation to be right, the less plausible it becomes. Because, the more you hold this interpretation to be right, that is, the warnings work therefore no one actually is

lost, the less effective the warning is, because you already know in advance that no one is going to be lost. In other words, the more you believe that this interpretation is correct, the less effective the warning is. So, the right interpretation of this passage means there's no warning, so how can you base the entire interpretation on the assumption that the warning is so effective that no one is lost. Do you see what I mean? In other words, it strikes me as an intrinsically improbable, indeed even illogical, position to hold even though it is becoming better known.

So I confess I hold another view that is well known in the history of the interpretation of the Church. There are other views that are common enough. It's based on what we have already seen in chapter 3. Part of our problem is that we have too easy a notion of conversion. Someone has prayed this sinner's prayer and they're in. Well in God's perspective they are either in or they're not, no doubt. God knows those who are his. But nevertheless, the language of chapter 3, in which there is a parallel drawn to the experience of the Israelites in the Old Testament, shows us that conversion can be thought of as a more complex thing. The Israelites escaped from Egypt; in that sense they were saved out *of*, but they never got in *to* the Promised Land, at least the generation over twenty, with a few exceptions, they never got in. So similarly, the author seems to be saying, it's possible for people in some sense to close with Christ and to be considered Christians, to be thought believers, but yet not make it to the last day. They're thought to be Christians, they're accepted as Christians, they're baptized members in good standing in the Church, but if the warning of the Old Testament experience of the Israelites is taken seriously, then it's possible, actually, not to get in; you fall away from the faith before you get in. And when you allow for that sort of notion, then it's easy to remember many, many passages in Scripture that say something roughly similar. For example, a text I've mentioned before, 1 John chapter 2, verses 18 and 19, "Certain people," John writes, "went out from us"—that is, went out from the Church—"in order that it might be made clear that they were not of us. If they had been of us, they would have remained with us, but their going shows that they were not of us." So, they went out from us—that is they were baptized members of the Church in good standing, accepted as Christians and so on, and so on, and so on—but they've abandoned the faith, they've left. And John says, their departure shows they really weren't of us, even though phenomenologically, they were of us, in reality, they weren't because if they had truly been of us, they wouldn't have gone. Which is exactly the same sort of notion that you get in 3:14. In other words, perseverance is the ultimate test. And there are so many passages of Scripture along those lines, some of which I quoted when we looked at 3:14, that it seems to me that that makes best sense here.

But someone raised the question last day, what does that do for our doctrine of assurance, for our understanding of Christian assurance? So, let me rabbit on a little bit in the fields of systematic theology for a moment and historical theology before coming back to the text. Then we'll open it up for question and comment. At the time of the Reformation, one of the disputes between the Protestant Reformers and the Catholic Church concerned the doctrine of assurance. In Catholic medieval theology,

which was then subsequently formulated even more strongly at Trent in the counter reformation, one of the doctrines was that it is a sin of presumption to claim that you know that you are saved, and no one can know that because you could sin again. And if you sin again, well was it a venial sin or was it a mortal sin? Will you make confession and receive grace from another mass before you are hit by a bus? And if it's a mortal sin, maybe purgatory won't burn off all of the guilt that you have. Maybe you'll be consigned to hell itself. And thus there's a certain kind of fear element that keeps you on the straight and narrow in medieval Catholicism. And by contrast, the Reformers, with variations, the Reformers argued, "No, if we're saved by Christ's death and resurrection, if our guilt becomes his, our guilt is reckoned to him, imputed to him, and his righteousness is reckoned to us, it's imputed to us, then we are as safe the moment after our conversion as we will be fifty billion years into eternity. The ground of our acceptance before God does not turn on us, it really does turn of Christ and Christ's cross work. That's why a Christian can have genuine assurance of eternal life right now." And then they had their text to back this up. For example 1 John chapter 5, verse 13, "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." Do you see? "I write this precisely so that you will know that you have eternal life."

Now, Luther and Calvin differed just a wee bit on how they put this together. Luther tended to make all of Christian assurance turn, in fact, on trusting in Christ. So if you lack Christian assurance, what you need is to have Christ and the Gospel placarded before you eyes ever more strongly so that you will simply trust him better, that's how you increase faith. The answer to lack of assurance is stronger faith, and what causes stronger faith is a clearer insight into what the Gospel is, so preach the Gospel. Do you see? And that's what engenders not only saving faith, but faith that brings with it what came to be called Christian assurance. Calvin's view is a bit different, although it is sometimes slightly misrepresented. Eventually I scoured not only the instituted for anything he said on the subject, but also commentaries on crucial passages and, in my view, Calvin is sometimes a wee bit misrepresented. But in the way that Calvin is often represented is that for him, Christian assurance is resting on a three-legged stool. On the one hand, there is the leg of Christ's cross work, in that sense he's very Lutheran. But in addition there is the confirming voice of the Spirit of God – the Spirit of God confirms that we really are the children of God in some sort of subjective sense. That's the second leg. And the third leg on this reading of Calvin is the transformation of life. That is to say, according to 1 John, if you really are a Christian, you will love the brothers and sisters and you will obey Christ. If you don't love the brothers and sisters and you don't obey Christ, then you've got no reason to think that you are a Christian. In other words, there is the confirming sign of good fruits. Doesn't Jesus say, by their fruit you shall know them? And thus, there are three legs on which Christian assurance rests. Number one, the finished work of Christ; number two, the confirming work of the Spirit; and number three, the transformed life. But as I've reread Calvin, what I find is that there are not three legs of equal length and proportion, there's one giant leg and two slightly confirming legs. Very difficult to make a stool out of that. The giant leg is very Lutheran, that is at the end of the day you trust Christ. That's the fundamental

ground of our acceptance before God. But nevertheless, the confirming work of the Spirit—read Romans 8, verse 15—and the confirming work of the transformed life, they are additional confirming signs. Do you see? And I think that that is correct.

But what you must see, then, is that Christian assurance is not interested in a mere raw epistemological stance. Let me explain. Those of us who have had the privilege of leading people to Christ have often observed how a few weeks later, couple of months later, they come back and they're all upset and bothered because they're not sure if maybe they've lost their salvation, they've sinned again, or whatever. And what you do in that case is take them to the promises of God. What they're doing is looking inwardly and seeing that they're not up to snuff and they're really trying to justify themselves again by works. And Christian assurance transcends that kind of thing, so you go back again and again to the promises of God. What is the Gospel? What does the Gospel promise? On the other hand, it won't be very long before you're in the ministry when someone comes up to you saying something like this—this is a real case, someone who had been a long devoted father and husband, Christian man in the Church, taught a Sunday School class, been a deacon, and so on, and so on, and so on. And he comes in, he's now in his mid-to-late forties, a rising star in the business field, and so on. And he comes in and says something like, "Pastor Don, I don't know how to say this, but I think I'm losing my faith. I mean, I'm just finding it more and more difficult to believe all this stuff anymore." What do you do? What do you say? So you give the same promises of God that you give to the brand new baby Christian who is just sort of getting anchored? This chap knows them all, probably memorized half of them. Well I'll tell you what I say, and I've learned this one in the school of hard knocks. I'll always ask two or three questions. I'll ask, "What's your reading been like in the last two years?" Cause every once in a while, you'll find some of these people who have had a genuine faith, but in a somewhat simplistic faith they've never faced really difficult intellectual questions. And so, they're intellectual late bloomers and then they start reading Richard Dawkins, or one of the new Atheists, and it throws them for a loop. They've never just thought about it. What they need is some elementary apologetics and some of the excellent responses, and so on. They're just late-bloomers, intellectually, that can happen. That's a minority stance. But in another question that I'll always ask them is, "With whom are you sleeping with other than your spouse?" Now even if they haven't been doing something like that, the guilt comes over their faces almost always about, if not that, about something else. In other words, one of the things that can destroy faith is sin; unconfessed, buried, suppressed sin. There's no joy in the Lord, there's no sense to it all anymore, there's an unacknowledged guilty feeling because in fact there is real moral guilt. Or I might say, "When was the last time that you read the Bible? When did you stop praying?" In other words, God has provided means of grace and in some such cases, they're caught up short, they repent, and get their lives back on track. And in some cases, they don't and drift off and remain apostate till the day they die. But while they're in that state, who am I to tell which one is succumbing to a temporary falling away, a temporary decay that'll be brought back with repentance and faith, and which ones, in fact, are apostate?

Apostasy is merely the moving away, *apo*, from the *stasis*, the place that you were standing. Now obviously, if you are moving away from genuine salvation—you are genuinely converted—and you move away from that to not being converted, then you are in the Arminian camp. That's the way you are reading this text. But on the other hand, if you're moving away from what might be called phenomenological conversion, although that expression has its problems; that is, you are accepted in all public fronts as a believer, you've shown signs of grace, there's fruitfulness there, and you've participated in the Christian Church, and you're accepted as a fellow believer, and then you move away from that position. Well, in the light of chapter 3, you're moving away from your public stance, you're moving away from what grace you've already tasted, but it's not as if you are moving away from salvation in the absolute sense, because in the absolute sense that means—according to such texts such as 1 John 2, and Hebrews 3, and the parable of the sower, and so on, and so on, and so on—that you didn't have the root of the matter in you so that you would persevere to the end. In other words, it's possible to drink deeply enough of grace that your life changes, but not so deeply of grace that you persevere to the end. And that's what raises questions of, where then is Christian assurance? And the answer at that point then, I would say, is this: The Bible provides you with rich, thick, encouraging, bountiful assurance and promise as long as you are walking with Jesus. But it is not interested in providing you with absolutist epistemological certainty when you are living in a fashion indistinguishable from the world of the flesh and the Devil. At that point, instead it gives warning and says, in effect, Are you really a Christian? If so, you will repent and return. And if not, God have mercy on your soul.

This has huge pastoral implications; you see, I think we've put the wrong emphasis on the doctrine of Christian assurance. I think the doctrine of Christian assurance is very important, but it needs to be understood within the matrix of all of these other structures of what conversion looks like and so on. Do you see? The nature of Christian fruit and so forth. One of the things you will certainly face sooner or later in pastoral ministry—I remember first time it happened to me, this was the wife of another pastor, a friend much older than I; he was old enough to be my father. And a good man, a good man. I was still a very young pastor and his wife came to me, her husband knew about it, because she was having huge doubts about her salvation. But she was one of these superior senior saints whose life was about as immaculate as you can imagine. You know, she was godly, she was prayerful, she read her Scriptures, she was gentle with people, her relationships were superb, and on and on and on and on and on. And yet, she'd go through these terrible dark nights of the soul where she's on the edge of despair, almost on the edge of suicide, because she couldn't believe that she was somehow good enough to enter the kingdom. And it's not that she didn't understand the Gospel, the way she understood "good enough" was not, "I have to earn my salvation," but after all that the New Testament does say about by their works, by their fruits, you shall know them. So have I shown enough fruit? And in her own thinking, she'd never shown enough fruit. And to people like that, what you have to do again and again and again is go back to the multitude of the promises of God. At the end of the day, you're not saved on the ground of your fruit. They are merely confirming witnesses, but the ultimate ground is the finished

of Christ. So, I gave her passages of Scripture to memorize that I wanted her to memorize and recite a minimum of five times a day and then come back after she had memorized them, and come back and recite them to me. And then we'd work through them together and so on. I wanted her to change her whole thinking. Do you see? But the doctrine of Christian assurance is not just raw epistemology, so that the first dude who comes in to see me who is doubting his salvation, I can simply say, "Hey, you made a profession of faith, once saved always saved, you're in, no sweat." To him, I want to say, "By their fruit you shall know them." In other words, the doctrine of Christian assurance is itself nestled into an array of other Christian emphases and doctrines and biblical themes and soon, not least in the epistle of the Hebrews, as well as in many, many other texts.

Now within that framework then, look back at this passage: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace." Now the main point of those verses is plain as a pikestaff: whatever this apostasy is, if you do fall into it, you can't get back. It's impossible. That's what the text says. Agreed? But then the second thing that has to be sorted out is, is it possible to speak of someone in all of these relative clauses—been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God, the powers of the coming age, and so on, and who have fallen away—is it possible that such people are merely phenomenological Christians? That's the question. If you say no, you are on the Arminian camp. If you say yes, you're on the more Reformed camp. That's really what it turns on. And I would say that that really turns on the richness or thickness of your theology of conversion. Think, for example, of Simon the Sorcerer, as he's variously called in Acts chapter 8. He believed and the Holy Spirit came on people, presumably also himself, as one of the believers, yet when he thinks that he can get this power from the Apostles by paying money, what Peter says to him is quite literally, "To hell with you and your money; may you and your money perish." In other words, it seems to me that it's possible to receive enough of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and a genuine glimpse of the age to come, and to taste of the fellowship that you enjoy among Christians in the context of the Church and so on. To really taste something of the powers of the age to come, yet still not have that, what should we call it, that plentitude of grace that enables you to genuinely persevere to the end... Now there was an exchange of essays a number of years ago between Scott McKnight on the Arminian side and Wayne Grudem on the Reformed side, working through these various clauses, where each tried to show parallels to justify their own view. And I commend those to you if you want to pursue this matter a wee bit farther. And then, chapter 6, verse 7, "Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned." Again, this is another way of saying, "By their fruit you shall know them." In that light, then, verse 9 is pastorally sympathetic rather than a

bold affirmation that apostasy is always an empty set. “We want each of you, then, to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

Now there’s so much more that could be said, but are there questions that arise out of this?

Student 1: “So if you did know of an elder, or maybe he was in your church and he came to you and said such, what would you do? What steps would you take?”

So if an elder, perhaps, in my church came and said these sorts of things, what steps would I take? Well, the initial steps I’ve already indicated. I would start asking those sorts of probing questions. And then where it went from there would depend on what sort of answers he gave me. If he denied that there was anything, but you could so that it was all bluster and excuse, and he’s lying through his teeth, I might challenge him in two or three meetings; take him out for breakfast, try to gain his confidence, get him to open up a wee bit before I went any farther. If on the other hand, if he was opening up and was confessing these things, but was belligerent about it, then sooner or later he would have to resign, obviously. If on the other hand, he’s opening up about it and is really scared about where he is going, then there are all kinds of pastoral steps that could be taken to encourage him back to faithfulness and obedience and the disciplines of life that mean that he is in the word and bearing witness to Christ and so forth. Do you see? So, what you would do pastorally really would depend on what sort of comeback you got.

Student 2: “If there is so much of a disagreement over the interpretation of this passage and, out of your talk, clearly about perseverance of the saints versus apostasy, kind of in and out, is there maybe, is there something wrong with the way we’re asking the question? Or are we trying to answer a category that Scripture just is not interested in answering? Does that make sense?”

Yes, the question is if there is this much dispute over the passage then are we perhaps trying to force the passage to answer questions that it is not really interested in answering. The difficulty, of course, is that there is no Christian doctrine that has not been challenged by some sector in the history of the Church. I mean, you could raise the same sorts of questions about what is now viewed as orthodoxy in Christology. You think of the fights, especially in the Third and Fourth Centuries that bred ultimately Nicaea and Constantinople, and Chalcedon rather, and those fights return today—Jehovah’s Witnesses and a different vein in Mormonism and so on. There is no major doctrine that has not been fought over... none. If you ask what is it that adds temper to this one, it’s partly because in American forms of evangelistic preaching there has been a lot of stress in many circles on taking a person through some structure of evangelism and then giving them Christian assurance right away. Now the reasons for that are complex, we don’t need to go into them, but that’s very common. I mean, when I was a young man

and first bearing witness to Christ, I mean that's what you were told. It doesn't matter whether you were using the four laws or Kennedy's Five Steps or whatever, or the John Road as it was called—you get to the end of the John Road and somebody has prayed a prayer of confession and repentance and then you say to the person, "Well, do you have eternal life?" "Um, I don't know?" "Well what does this text say, John 5:24?" "Well this text says that if you believe in the Son, then you have eternal life." "Yes, so what?" "Well, do you believe in the Son of God?" "Yes, I do." "So?" "So what?" "Well, it says that if you believe in the Son of God, what happens? It says that you have eternal life." "Yeah, so." "So, do you believe in the Son of God?" "Yes." "So, do you have eternal life?" "Well I guess I must." I mean, you know, this is a screwball conversation, but we've all had them. Do you know what I mean? And the theory behind it is, you're trying to get people Christian assurance that is based on the promises of God rather than how they feel about something. I mean the motive behind such argumentation is entirely good, but the interesting thing is, of the twenty seven or so conversion accounts told in the book of Acts, in no case does any of the Apostles take that next step. It's interesting. It seems to me that Christian assurance ought to come out of discussions in the next few weeks and months as they are beginning to doubt things and things are put into a larger framework and so on. But we've had this Christian assurance thing so much tied to Evangelism for so long, including mass evangelism, that we just think that's the way it's done. And then it gets reduced to slogans like "Once saved, always saved," which at one level I affirm and another level I think is mere sloganeering and really giving a false impression. And then we start overlooking the subtleties and nuances in Scripture about what conversion looks like. So it turns, ultimately, around the fact that we don't know our Bibles well enough. I mean I've seen endless popular discussions about these kinds of things that never mention Hebrews 3 before you read Hebrews 6, but you're supposed to read Hebrew 3 before Hebrews 6. And then it seems to me it sheds quite a lot of light on the passage and it orientates you in a slightly different direction. Do you see? And so, I would argue, quite frankly, the case that I've presented is pretty strong on biblical, exegetical, theological, contextual grounds. To me it's very strong. And if you want to hold to another stance because of the tradition you come from, well, God bless you, just make sure you work it out biblically and be prepared to reform your views in light of Scripture. Another question?

Student 3: "Regarding teaching someone to rest in the finished work of Christ and yet calling them to bear fruit... How do we help navigate people through that so that it doesn't become a works-righteousness in the sense of, 'Well I'm not seeing, you know, X, Y, and Z fruits. It must not be.' How do we call people to rest in the finished work of Christ and still challenge and push for life transformation in a way that points them back to that finished work?"

Right. The heart of the issue – now, there are lots of footnotes and caveats that you could put in this – the heart of the issue is that genuine Christians learn to obey out of gratitude and joy. In other words, as the Gospel becomes more and more precious to them, the natural response to that, or perhaps I should say the supernatural

response to that, is precisely gratitude to Christ and wanting to honor him, and out of the joy of the Lord to serve in a variety of ways. It's a privilege. So that's what drives an apostle to say that he wants know him, not only the power of his resurrection, but the fellowship of his suffering. Now you can't say that out of mere duty, but out of allegiance to Christ it makes sense. So, it's a mistake, therefore, in a church to spend sermon after sermon after sermon after sermon after sermon trying to produce fruit by merely whipping people. That just reduces things to endless moralism. And, you see, that is the tendency all of us have when you see a culture beginning to slide. You see a lot of young people drifting off to this or that or the other, warning them against porn and all that, and you do have to give warnings, whatever, yeah. But at the end of the day you don't beat porn by whipping people and simply using Covenant Eyes, although that might be a helpful tool for some people. At the end of the day, you really beat it by so glorying in Christ that sleaze looks dirty. That's how you beat it. And that means that there's a sort of Gospel-centeredness, a richness to the enjoyment of the Lord, and the enjoyment of the Spirit, and the enjoyment of the cross work of Christ, and so on, and so on, and so on, that sleaze looks dirty. And that really is the ultimate answer. Now, obviously it's possible that you're going to have some people in the congregation, then, who nominally, at least, are saying "I'm so glorying in the Lord now that I can sin gloriously too. Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds. Let's have lots of sin so we can have lots of grace." They might not put it quite so crassly as that, but they begin to think that. And then you have to throw in the warning passages and so on. Pastoral care is never a single formula, it takes in all the sweep and embrace of Scripture. But, nevertheless, having said all of that, there is something really important about showing what motivates Christian ethics. What motivates Christian ethics is not mere law. So, love your wife as Christ loved the Church. That's a Gospel basis. Do you see? Forgive one another as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven you. That's a Gospel basis. There's a huge and rich repetition of Gospel motivation for transformed living in the New Testament, and that has to be a major emphasis in Christian preaching, it seems to me. Does that help?

Student 3: "Yes, thank you."

Student 4: "You keep talking about how chapter 3 helps define that, and you did it also last year... and I still don't quite see how chapter 3 portrays, or the two verses especially, portray a Calvinistic view or non-Arminian view. And I'm not trying to argue for the other sides, but what I read when I read it, maybe because I come from a different background, is, 'If you don't persevere to the end, at the end you won't be a Christian.' That's what, and that seems to be the warning. And maybe I need help and maybe it's not here. But when I read that and I read 6, it seems to reinforce the idea that, at least practically, we're to warn people, 'Be careful, you might fall away.' Which means you're very possibly saved and have lived as a Christian, but you can still let go of that somehow or you can still 'reject' it is probably the best word. I'm sure you know all of these arguments, but I'm just trying to figure out... Because it seems that verse 3, or chapter 3, is just so clearly not that for you and I keep reading that and thinking, 'Where do you see that?'

Am I reading something crooked into the text, twisting your pure minds into nasty Reformed byways? Well, I may be, but I beg you to look at the first part of 3:14. What's the first part say?

Student 4: "For we have come to share in Christ."

Ah, we have come to share in Christ. That is, I think all sides will agree, we're Christians. We've come to share in Christ, if what?

Student 4: "Indeed we hold our original confidences firm to the end."

Yeah. It doesn't say we will come to share in Christ if we hold it firmly to the end. This is a definition of what a genuine believer is. A genuine believer, by definition, is someone who sticks, by definition. And that is in line, you see, with so many other biblical texts. Now, you can talk about the biblical texts run both sides of this particular divide. That is, you can look at this perseverance as you persevering or you can look at it as God preserving you. So the perseverance of the saints is tied to the preservation of the saints, as it were. And here, the focus is on the performance. That is, you actually do persevere. Who is a Christian? Who shares in Christ? Who is a partaker of Christ? The one who perseveres to the end. That's the answer. And that theme is presupposed in the passage in 1 John 2. It's presupposed, you see, in the parable of the soils, where some, like those that fall on rocky ground that I mentioned last time, they seem to be the most promising of the crop. Jesus explains, they are the ones who receive the Word, who immediately receive it with joy. They're converts, for goodness sake, by all phenomenological standards. They're accepted as believers, they seem to be the most promising of the crop. But nevertheless, when persecution or trial comes their roots come down and they don't get anything so they keel over and there's no fruit, there's no long-term life. There's enough life to begin with, but it doesn't count because there's no long-term life, there's no long-term fruit. Do you see? And there are so many passages along those lines that you see 3:14 within that matrix, it seems to me giving you a definition of a Christian as being one who sticks, then that prepares you for reading chapter 6, it seems to me, in a similar fashion. Does that, at least make sense, even if you don't like it?

Student 4: "Well, it can, but what you're, it seems to me, assuming that 3:14, the first part, like it's saying, 'We can know this now, that you persevere to the end,' rather than saying that at the end, we will know who's a Christian and who's not."

Well I'm sure that at the end we will know, but that's not the point he's trying to argue. It's not trying to say, now versus then or anything, but it is trying to say, who is a Christian, who is the partaker in Christ, who is the sharer in Christ. The sharer in Christ is the one who perseveres to the end, period. It's not saying, the true Christian, the one who really does know Christ, the one who shares in Christ, is a partaker in Christ, is the only one who finds out right at the end. It doesn't say that.

In other words, I think that's what you're presupposing it says, because of an Arminian heritage. But what the text actually says is, who is the one who shares in Christ? Well the one who shares in Christ is the one who perseveres to the end. It's all it says.

Student 4: "How is that not Arminian? I don't come from an Arminian background, but I don't know what background I come from, but how is that an Arminian background."

Heinz 57

Student 4: "I come from a non-Christian country, but how can that not be Arminian? For an Arminian to say, 'Look at the end, these are the Christians that got it.' Because an Arminian is not saying, 'You'll fall away from Christ and you're still a Christian.' I mean that's absurd..."

But it's not just saying, "Only at the end do you find out." Now there is some sense to that, but it's not what the text is saying. It's encouraging you to persevere in the knowledge that those who persevere to the end are, by definition, those who are Christians, by definition. In other words, if they don't persevere to the end, they're not Christians. It's a defining category. Rather than saying, "You might be a Christian now, but if you ever really want to find out who's really a Christian come along later and then you'll find out." It's not saying that. It's not suggesting that there are some who are sharers in Christ and partakers in Christ now short-term, and then they discover that they're not really sharers in Christ long-term, it's not making that sort of distinction. It's saying, "Who is a true sharer in Christ? By definition, it's the one who perseveres to the end." It's a definitional category. And if you want to come and talk to me about further... But to me, that's pretty clear. Are others having difficulty on this line, on the definition level? I've got somebody actually who's doing a whole PhD on this verse and the Greek conditional and all the surrounding words and so on and so on and so on. It will be interesting to see what happens in due course.

Student 5: What was the name of that hymn that you quoted by Michael Bruce?

The first line was, "Where high the heavenly temple stands," and you could find it probably online. And if not, I've got old British hymnbooks.

Okay, now I would love to spend more time on this, but I want to make another step today, since we only have one more class period for Hebrews. So we're going to come to chapter 7. Now, here I want to show you the flow of the argument. That's all I have time to do. Melchizedek is an enigmatic figure. In the Old Testament, he shows up only twice, once in Genesis 14 and once in Psalm 110. In the New Testament, he shows up in only one book, though several times, namely this book. That's it. So he shows up in three texts in the entire Bible. On the other hand, he's so enigmatic a figure that it is not too surprising that the literature of second temple Judaism introduces Melchizedek with various speculations surrounding him. It wouldn't hurt for you to spend a little time looking at any of the editions of the Dead

Sea Scrolls; “Easy English Edition” is by Geza Vermes, but there are many other more critical editions. And finding in it “11, Q, *melch*,” “eleven”, the letter “Q,” then “M-E-L-C-H.” That means the manuscript came from the eleventh cave at Qumran, hence “Q,” and it’s the Melchizedek scroll. It’s a whole scroll on various Jewish speculations about who Melchizedek is and what he was doing. And believe me, the texts are *miles* away from anything that Hebrews says. I wish I had time to unpack them, but believe me, the speculations are a long, long, long way away from the argument of Hebrews.

Before we look at the flow of the argument in chapter 7, look for a moment rather quickly at Genesis 14. I’m sure you will remember the context; there are several kings under Kedorlaomer who are involved in raiding parties. Now, when you hear the word king, you’re not supposed to think of something parallel to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, or to the King of Saudi Arabia. These are, in fact, small village mayors. So, the ruler of any particular town was the king. And then he allies himself with other kings and forms a small army. But, if many of these towns would have had somewhere between 2–7,000 people or something, the number of fighting men from each would not be huge. So they’re forming raiding parties. So you have several kings under Kedorlaomer—four kings—and they’re heading farther and farther south. They’re from the far north of the country, they’re heading farther and farther south until they begin to threaten King of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah—more towns in the plains—and they make an alliance with five kings. And eventually there’s something of a pitched fight and Sodom loses, and as a result Kedorlaomer and his bunch, they take away some folks for slaves—women and children, some old people—and all the cattle and money, and so on they can find, leaving the rest behind in ruins. And then during the attack, somebody managed to get away and reports to Abram, verse 13, who’s “living near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshkol and Aner,” who all seem to be small kings or the like, certainly powerful men, possibly powerful nomads who are allied with Abraham—some sort of security system so they’re protecting each other. So now you have Abram and three of his friends who vow to go off after this lot. And Abram’s got 318 trained men, we’re told, in his household. Well this does not mean they’re trained as force-recon marines, or something like that; all it means is that they’re fit and they can handle themselves. There might be a few swords around, a bunch of cudgels, and so you’re not supposed to think of World War II, Battle of the Bulge, or something like that. What a lot of these skirmishes did was that one group would chase another group and then turn around and fight. And then eventually one group would break and run away, and as they ran away, the first group would pursue them quite a long way until they started hacking down the stragglers, and eventually they let the rest of them run away. That way you knew you won. So that’s the way a lot of these fights worked. So, don’t forget at this time, Abram is at the South near Hebron, and they trace them as far as Dan—that’s way up in the North. But the point is that the bad guys are herding sheep and cattle and old people and children and so on, so they’re going slow. So even if you allow two or three or four days before Abram hears about this and gets his guys together and sorts it all out, you see, the point is that they could make that trip up there on foot—running twelve hours a day—they

could get up there, do you see, in two, two and a half days, something like that. And the others are taking days to get up there. So eventually they catch up with them and they beat them up, kill a bunch of them, collect all the goods, and start the trek back home again; that much is clear.

Now, verse 17, “After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh,” then skip 18 to 20, “The king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.’ ” He was not being generous, that was general practice. That is to say, if a mercenary group went in and got things back, they would keep all the produce and the people themselves would be released. Do you see? So, Sodom is not being generous here, he’s merely following the customs of the day. “But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me—[that is] to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share.’ ” So, this passage makes perfect sense if you drop out verses 18 to 20. You don’t need verse 18 to 20 in to deal with the main structure of the account. But that raises, acutely, what purpose then is verses 18 to 20, what do they add? And in fact, why are they inserted here? They’re inserted so roughly that some critics inevitably say, “This is the work of some later, fumble-handed editor.” But it’s much better to say, “What is the editor thinking, what is the writer thinking, when the account of the exchange between Abram and Sodom is broken up, precisely so that something is said about Melchizedek?” So verse 17, we’re told that the king of Sodom comes to meet Abram. Then before verse 21, you read, “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything,” and then back to Sodom.

Well, on the face of it, part of what Melchizedek is doing here is, he’s serving as a foil for Sodom; from a literary point of view, he’s a foil. Abram won’t have anything to do with Sodom, but not only does he receive the bread and wine from Melchizedek—this is not meant to be taken in some sort of sacramental sense, it just means foodstuffs; they come back and they’re hungry and thirsty, they’re provided with bread and wine—Abram, for his part, pays a tithe to him and honors him. So who is this Melchizedek? In the history of the Church, it is pretty common to find people arguing the position that Melchizedek is a pre-incarnate visitation of the Eternal Son. But with the greatest respect for the many Christians that have argued this corner, I don’t think there’s anything that justifies it, and I think there’s quite a lot that contradicts it. Not least in Hebrews 7, which says that he is *like* the Son of God, it doesn’t say that he *is* the Son of God. No, no. Part of our problem is that we sometimes think wrongly without any good evidence that the only monotheist in the entire region at that time was Abram. Why conclude that? Why couldn’t there have been, why shouldn’t there have been others with the memory of the one God? Notice

that when he refers to this one God Creator of Heaven and Earth, he does not say, "He is Yahweh." Abram, in the subsequent verses, refers to him as Yahweh, the covenant name for God, but Melchizedek doesn't know him along those lines. What he believes in is either monotheism—belief in one God—or at least that there is one supreme god and that he's the creator of all. It's really quite striking. Why not suppose then, rather, that Melchizedek is someone in the region with whom Abram had friendly relationships, precisely because they were kindred spirits? In fact, you read the account and it sounds as if they knew each other. Otherwise, why would Abram respond one way to Melchizedek, and the other way to Sodom? He knows what Sodom represents and won't have anything to do with them. He knows what Melchizedek represents and wants to have something to do with him. And in that framework he receives something from his hand and pays something to him; receives a blessing from him as well as the food. And that establishes the hierarchy. Melchizedek is more important than Abram. Notice, too, that he's a king-priest; he's king of Salem. You're in the right area to suppose, you can't quite prove it, that this is Jeru Salem. There were a lot of Salems, Jeru Salem was one of the them. So he's king of Salem. In fact, the name Melchizedek, *Melch* and *Zedek*, means "king of righteousness." That's what the name means, his name means "king of righteousness" and the town over which he rules is Salem. Might well be Jeru Salem. And he's also priest of God Most High. Salem, of course, has the radicals of Shalom. In that sense, he's king of peace. Now that's just on the very surface of the text.

There is another element that you cannot help but notice in this regard. Namely, in the book of Genesis, just about anybody who's anybody has a biblio... has a genealogy attached—you can see where I live when I say a bibliography attached, yes—has a genealogy attached. Do you see? So that you not only have the great table of nations in chapter 10, but in chapter 5, so and so lived so many years, and he begat so and so, and then he died. And so and so lived so many years, and begat so and so, and then he lived so many more years, and then he died, and so on and so on. Everybody who's anybody's connected and genealogies are spelled out. There are some unimportant people whose genealogy is not spelled out, but anyone who's important, it is spelled out. And then you come to Melchizedek and he's so important that even the patriarch of patriarchs, Abraham himself, the one who is going to be head of all the Israelites and so on, he pays a tithe to him, yet there is nothing said about Melchizedek. There's no mommy, there's no daddy, there's no genealogy. And you can't help but notice it and wonder. So I wonder how many mystifying readings there were of Genesis over the centuries.

Then you come to Psalm 110, which I think is the passage, the Old Testament chapter, most frequently cited in the New Testament; more frequently cited than Isaiah 53. And the text specifically says it's a psalm of David; lots of people deny it today, Jesus affirms that it's a psalm of David in Matthew chapter 22, verses 41 and 46. If you want to check that out: Matthew 22:41–46. Now if it's David who wrote it, it affects the first verse. Supposing it's not David who wrote it, supposing it's some sort of courtier, a person in the court. If a courtier says, "The LORD,"—Yahweh, notice the caps—"The LORD says to my lord," then my lord is almost certainly the

king. "Yahweh says to my lord, the king," if a courtier wrote. But supposing it's David who wrote it, then to whom is "my lord" referring? "The LORD says to my lord." Who is "my lord"? And out of this has arisen lots of estimation across the centuries that this must therefore be some kind of messianic psalm. It's divided into two oracles and two explanations. The first oracle, verse 1, "The LORD [Yahweh] says to my lord"—this messianic figure—"Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." That sounds very much like Psalm 2, Yahweh declaring that this chap is king and ruler and so on, and then there's meditation on it, "The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, 'Rule in the midst of your enemies.'" So, this presupposes that it's Davidic figure—though not David—a Davidic figure to whom David refers to as "my lord" because he is ruling from Zion, it's part of the Davidic heritage. But then the second oracle is found in verse 4, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'" And then further reflection. Now that is stunning. You just have to stop and see how stunning it is, because now Yahweh is speaking to this Davidic-messianic figure, "You are a king and you are a priest." But in David's day, of course, you're after the establishment of the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses insisted that no king could be priest and no priest could be king. Now that wasn't in place when Melchizedek was priest-king, that's before the giving of the Law. But by the time you get to David, then the Law of God makes this very clear. That is, a king had to come from the tribe of Judah and belong to David's line, and the priest had to come from the tribe of Levi, and if he were High Priest, he had to come from Aaron's line. And therefore anybody who tried to combine those two things was in big trouble. Like the first king of the united monarchy, King Saul, who tried to take on priestly duties when he was king, and he lost the throne because of it, lost his life, lost the dynasty. But now, here is David writing to some messianic figure, "Sit at my right hand, you're the king and you are priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." How did David get to that point? It could simply be by oracular revelation, of course, but I think there's another factor that you have to bear in mind, and with this we close and then pick it up next day. David, after all, was a literate man. There were all kinds of people who weren't, but it's not for nothing that he's called a sweet singer of Israel; he was a poet. And as the king, he would have had access to both. And moreover, according to Deuteronomy 17, one of the things that kings were supposed to do was read over this book of the Law again and again and again and again. So, David at his best would spend time, daily, having what we would call devotions—reading the book of the Law, meditating on it, thinking about it. And, you can well imagine him, at the risk of too much speculation; you can well imagine him coming eventually to Genesis 14, maybe more than once cycling around and reading Genesis 14 again and again and again. And he comes across this strange figure of Melchizedek, and he knows both this strange figure of Melchizedek, he's biblically literate, but one day now he is no longer king at Hebron, he has become king in Jerusalem. But he knows, after all the king before him found out the hard way, he knows that he cannot be king and priest. But here in Genesis 14, he's reading of a king-priest who is king of Salem. And he cannot help but think, 'Well the Law of God from the time of Moses establishes that you cannot be king and priest. But before the Law of Moses, there is one who was a king-priest. It cannot be an

intrinsic evil. Maybe one day, there will be a king-priest again; not just a king and then a separate figure who is a priest. But if God, for some strange reason, puts in this strange figure of Melchizedek—so important that even Abraham pays him homage—who is nevertheless a king-priest before the Law forbids it, maybe, maybe eventually there will be a king-priest again. The Law would have to change. It would mean, for example, that this priest could not be a priest in the order of Levi because it's the Levitical priesthood that is forbidden to the king, but maybe he could be a priest in the order of Melchizedek.' And borne along by the Spirit of God, he picks up his pen and he writes the second oracle, "You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." In other words, there's a trajectory already being established in the Old Testament from Genesis 14 to Psalm 110, which the writer to the Hebrews picks up and, as we'll see in a very, very important move in chapter 7, applies it to King Jesus, who's also a priest. Now we'll come to that next day before we'll press on to other things and finish off the book. Have a nice day.