

Youth Persevering in Christian Faith in the Midst of Post-Religious Persecution Through a Narrative- based Bible Study of the Book of Hebrews

By

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I declare that “Youth Persevering in Christian Faith in the Midst of Post-Religious Persecution Through a Narrative-based Bible Study of the Book of Hebrews” is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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To my loved ones, mentors and spiritual leaders for believing in me and supporting me, and to my Beloved for the passion to see it through

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ABSTRACT

The strength of the book of Hebrews exists in the purpose for which it was written. That purpose being in encouraging Jewish Christians, not to turn away from their faith in Jesus Christ in the midst of suffering. Especially not to revert back to Judaism with the hope of less persecution. I could not help draw on the similarities between the circumstances of the Hebrews and our modern youth. The intended purpose of this curriculum is to encourage youth from this millennium not to turn away from Christ, in the midst of persecution or other pressures to abandon, or compromise their faith. We will teach them the Biblical narrative of the book of Hebrews, with specific focus on the necessity for a mediator in Christ. He alone was capable of restoring the relationship between sinful humanity and a holy God. In order to engage youth's imaginations and help them to relate to the Biblical narrative, we will create a fictional world of the book of Hebrews. Our aim is to lead youth into contemplating the Scriptures and engage with the context of the Hebrew Christians, as they share how these characters wrestle with questions of faith and live through various types of persecutions. Further parallels will be drawn to investigate the persecution of Christians in our modern day and the temptation to abandon their faith in Christ. Modern day circumstances have become similar to the world as it was when the book of Hebrews was written, when Christianity was not central. Once again, Christianity has moved from being central into the margins of society in a Post-Christian world. Through this curriculum therefore, our ultimate aim is to strengthen youth in the Spiritual Disciplines; encouraging them in their faith and enabling them to persevere as followers of Christ in a world that is growing increasingly hostile towards Christians.

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INTRODUCTION

a) Informal Introduction

This dissertation, “Youth Persevering in Christian Faith in the Midst of Post-Religious Persecution Through a Narrative-based Bible Study of the Book of Hebrews” was born out of a place of desperation. I was ministering as Youth Pastor to South African youth in Abu Dhabi. What I encountered there was a global society, where Christianity was not central to most people’s lives. At this time the Middle East and surrounding nations were steeped in religiously fueled war, and there was a general feeling of suspicion towards anything religious. Other world views which were more inclusive and tolerant was more attractive to the young people I was serving. The general consensus was, “Why Jesus? What makes us sure that we are right?”

Upon my return to South Africa, the climate was different toward religion. However, I found that a lot of South Africans have lost sight of Jesus because of the challenging and threatening conditions in our country. They are struggling as they try and survive political and economic instability while fighting a war against increasing violence and crime. Many South Africans are looking for opportunities elsewhere, willing to give up their citizenship for the sake of better living conditions and opportunities.

What our studies revealed, is that humanity still pang with a deep hunger for the truth of God. Our lives do depend on external circumstances, however, there is a deeper call from within which make it possible to thrive. No matter where in the world we live or what our circumstances may be, God has given us a Living Hope that anchor our souls (Hebrews 6:19). The book of Hebrews encouraged a community towards faith, in God’s answer to their suffering and persecution through the Persons of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It did not necessarily change their circumstances, but it did fortify them against it. I am convinced that it could provide the same encouragement and fortification to modern youth, as it did to the early Christians of Hebrews.

b) Introducing the Research Question

Considering this reality introduces our research question: “How can a narrative-based Bible Study in Hebrews be used to encourage young people to keep their faith in the midst of post-religious persecution?” In this dissertation, we will unpack this subject in hope to bring our young people to faith in Christ through calling them back to focus on Jesus. As Hebrews 12:1-2 says, “...Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith”. Our methodology will be applied as follow: Exploring the similarities between our modern world and the circumstances in the world of the Hebrews, we will make a study of the post religious context and its similarities to the world of the Christians in the book of Hebrews. We will make a Grammatical Historic and Hermeneutic analysis of the relevant texts through exegetical analysis of the Biblical text. The aim of the exegetical analysis will be towards the encouragement of faith within the narrative of Hebrews, from which we will be deriving an application from our findings of that same encouragement toward modern youth.

We shall therefore apply the literary qualitative research method, deriving our viewpoint after exploring the Biblical narratives, historical and other materials pertaining to the context and application of Hebrews to modern youth. Since we are considering narratives, we shall do biblical exegesis by using the descriptive method of interpretation; this involves describing the historical narrative, identifying the primary application in order to derive a secondary application. We shall be applying an inductive approach to our research, moving from specific observations emerging from our research to form a broader generalization toward our topic. Our research methodology will largely be qualitative since we are compiling data from Biblical exegesis and Apologetics. In chapter one we will study the challenges and persecution our young people face from external sources and the challenges they contend with from within themselves. Chapter two will explore our method and approach in formulating a narrative based bible study. In chapter three we will make a study of all the relevant texts which encourages faith in their original context, while chapter four will bridge the gap between the world of the Hebrews in their original context, and the world of our modern youth. In chapter five, all of our research will come together in a workable method of equipping youth with the Spiritual Disciplines of Bible intake through contemplative Bible study, prayer and meditation. Lastly, we will include an example of what a narrative based bible study curriculum in the book of Hebrews will look like.

CHAPTER 1: THE POST RELIGIOUS CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

1. A description of the Post Religious Context and its ramifications on young people's faith

1.1 Explore the Post Religious Context and scholarly discussions on the subject

Since the 18th Century Enlightenment, institutionalised Christendom have been in decline in the West and in previously European colonized countries. Since Christendom formed the basis of political and societal governance for many centuries, the decline left a vacuum, gradually being filled by secularisation and a growing suspicion of organized religion, as Stuart Murray states, "Decline in Christian belief and abandonment of Christian worldview were linked in the mid 18th century Enlightenment.... The political disintegration of Christendom can thus be perceived as a cause of secularisation" (2004:10). Murray interoperates the societal, psychological and institutional disintegration of Christendom as a consequence of secularisation and as a result he observes that, "Secularisation has continued at pace: secular assumptions rule contemporary society and guide political, economic and social decision making" (2004:11).

Several scholars agree that there is a definite decline in Christendom and religiosity. In its place a more pluralistic approach that is all-inclusive is seeping into the world. Netland and Johnson refer to it as a result in part to "post-colonial guilt" which drives many into the arms of a religious supermarket of modern pluralism, "As the number of religious options multiply, the relative authority of any individual tradition seems to diminish. Closely related to this is the contemporary tendency to regard religion in highly pragmatic, consumerism terms" (2000:53). A repercussion of "shopping" for religion is that religion, or faith has become a matter of opinion, separated from the world of facts, as Netland and Johnson in Carson observes, there is no longer the expectation for religion to provide "objectively true" answers to basic questions about the universe or human destiny and purpose "Rather, religions are assessed pragmatically simply on the basis of how well they meet the desires and felt needs of their adherents. If Christianity meets a person's needs, then it is the right fit for them"

(2000:53). As religion is fitted on like new clothes in the fitting room where the choice to “buy” or not amounts to a matter of opinion, Netland and Johnson nails it down to the effect this has on societies religious commitment. He states that nobody expects religion to provide answers or concrete facts:

The multiplication of options encourages religious consumerism... These effects on religious commitments are further reinforced by the tendency in the modern world to distinguish between the public world of facts – more clearly demonstrated in the physical sciences – and the private realm of opinions, values and preferences of religion being relegated to the latter (2000:53).

With religiosity in decline, it has left a new challenge but also an exciting opportunity to reintroduce the truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel to a world that is no longer familiar with Him. It is an opportunity to lead people away from the supermarket of religious consumerism, and offer them the simple truth of being “clothed in Christ” (Gal 3:27).

In view of this, we will explore how scholars have agreed upon the fact that Christendom is in decline, the process and its effects on those now responsible to carry forth the message and how it is similar to the world the early Christians in the book of Hebrews found themselves in.

In regards to youth especially, we will then explore how this impacts our communication of the Gospel, and how scholars have suggested novel ways to reintroduce Jesus in a post-religious world. Finally, we will demonstrate the challenges scholars have encountered and that we can expect in opposition to sharing the Gospel message with youth today. These challenges include Atheism, Scepticism, the challenge of a counter culture, reinforced by media and modern technology, the challenge of persevering under religious extremism from other belief systems and the persecution and terror it provokes, and, lastly, the challenge of religious pluralism.

1.1.1 Demise of Christendom and its effects

In the time the book of Hebrews was written, Christianity was still in its infancy, a fact David Pawson clearly outlines in his introduction to the book of Hebrews in his thought-provoking book, *Unlocking the Bible*. He puts the date for the book of Hebrews after Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in AD 55, and before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, since references in the Book of Hebrews make it clear that the temple practises were still ongoing during the time the author penned it. The church was growing and facing many difficulties on the margins of society, whether those challenges were external, like society's immorality or opposition to their faith, or internal, where Jewish Christians and Gentiles struggled to find unity in their new found faith in Christ. In comparing Romans with Hebrews, Pawson posits the following in highlighting the unique situations in which the Christians were:

In the Letter to the Romans there is no trace of persecution. The church has to fight immorality in Rome, but there isn't yet any direct persecution. But in the Letter to the Hebrews there is one section, which tells us the kind of persecution they were already suffering. None of them had been martyred yet... their homes were being vandalized. Their possessions were being confiscated. Some of them had been in prison – hence the reference in Hebrews to 'visit those who are in prison.' Timothy is mentioned as one of those imprisoned and released. It was getting tough to be a Christian. It wasn't costing them their lives at this point, but it was costing them pretty much everything else (2015:1113).

It is increasingly evident that there are definite similarities in our current society to the circumstances that the Christians in Hebrews found themselves. It is indeed becoming increasingly more difficult to be a Christian. It is felt that, in the West, Christianity has predominantly lost the central place it enjoyed before the start of the twentieth century and has become more peripheral in what is now described as the post-modern society. Though Christians in Western society are not necessarily experiencing persecution through bodily harm, they are increasingly faced with choices and pressures to conform to a society no longer shaped by Christian values and morals, just like the early Christians in Hebrews were. In this regard Stuart Murray observed:

Post Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions, which have developed to express Christian convictions, decline in influence. The demise of Christendom may be sudden or gradual. It involves both institutional and philosophical changes, for Christendom is both a power and a structure and a mind set (2004:19).

Though it may be alarming, it is in fact a great opportunity to reintroduce the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that is functioning without hope. As Malcolm Muggeridge puts it, “it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting, when every possibility of help from earthly sources sought and is not forthcoming... it is then that Christ’s hand reaches out sure and firm and His light shines brightest” (2003:77). The demise of Christendom is, therefore, not necessarily a curse but a blessing in disguise –although persecution is not experienced by all, it is certainly important enough to be noticed and prepared for by all. Stuart Murray explains that the demise in Christendom is not something experienced by all Christians, but mostly by Christians in Western Europe and other societies with roots in that culture and since history is mainly told from a Eurocentric perspective, Christians have only recently become familiar with the story of Asian Christianity which have spread and flourished in the face of major religious alternatives. Murray expounds that this may be beneficial to Christianity where Christendom is in demise:

The history of Asian Christianity may offer insights to Christians in post-Christendom faced with a plural religious context for which Christendom has not prepared us... Nor is post-Christendom the experience of Christians in nations, especially Africa, Asia, Latin America, where Christianity is growing exponentially in cultures that can be described as pre-Christendom or still-Christendom... Indeed, missionaries from the former ‘mission fields’ of Asia, Africa and Latin America are arriving in Europe in increasing numbers to evangelise former ‘sending nations’ (2004:14-15).

We can learn from each other as we embark on this current mission field, and fulfil our commission as disciples of Jesus Christ. As an Afrikaner growing up in South Africa, I grew up in a Christian culture passed along from the roots of my Western European ancestry which was established in South Africa predating its British colonial period. Looking back now I can see how certain traditions and practises in the church, had nothing to do with Christ but with controlling the larger society. Some church doctrines in the churches I grew up in were even adjusted to justify Apartheid. So Murray’s words struck a chord with me as I read about the history of Christendom. The challenge they faced with the church at the centre was to write doctrine for a larger society of nominal Christians rather than pursuing to really know Christ as a community; “Christendom was a totalitarian culture, challenging its beliefs was to

undermine society... In a society everyone belonged, everyone had to subscribe to the same beliefs, at least in public" (2004:68).

I have come to realize the profundity of this truth of what Murray said about the rise of Christendom during Roman Emperor Constantine's time:

These were remarkable changes requiring theological dexterity to explain how the church now at the centre was in continuity with the church on the margins of the first three centuries. So much looked different from the centre... The main price for the Christendom shift was the marginalisation of Jesus: for the church to come in from the margins to the centre, it had to push Jesus from the centre to the margins of Christianity. Not long ago it had been dangerous to join this illegal organisation, but now not belonging was disadvantageous (2004:48 & 108).

Murray further explains how this shift was not the demise of the Roman Empire, but rather how Christendom became the inherited culture providing a crucial link between ancient Rome and Greece into the transmission of the medieval future, "the Christian faith, rather than barbarian kingdoms, constituted the successor to the Roman Empire in the West" (2004:49-50). For centuries this Christian Empire has stood up against the test of time, until the Enlightenment of the 18th century, which was responsible for the start of Christendom's gradual decline.

Three hundred years later we stand once again, believers of Jesus no longer looking from the centre out into our world, but rather from the side-lines into the world unfamiliar with Jesus Christ. As the early Christians did, we too are now looking at the world through our faith and the Truth of Jesus, and not through the lenses of institution, tradition, power and culture.

1.1.2 Communication: Telling a familiar story

As Christendom has moved into the margins of society, it so happens that people are becoming less acquainted with the truth of the Gospel story. With more young people identifying themselves as atheist or with no religious affiliation at all, the younger generations are growing up in homes where religion is not shared and the stories of the Bible are not told, much less, taught.

Hebrews chapter one opens by saying, “*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things and through whom also He made the universe*” (1:1-2). The opening words of the book of Hebrews informs us of a God who is not silent, a God who has been communicating with humanity and continues to communicate with us. I agree with Mark E. Dever in Carson, who wrote in his essay, “Communicating sin in a Post-Modern World”, that our God is not a mute God. The fact that He communicates with us is also evidence that He is a personal God and a Person:

God has revealed Himself as a personal God and part of that personhood is His communication of truth. So we should communicate truth in all kinds of ways: by telling illustrative stories, by helping people to see the truth about their own world view, by helping non-Christian friends to reflect on the inadequacies of their own understanding of the world (2000:144).

In a world where God is being removed from everything in society once associated and established in His Name, our communication of Him is one of our most important missions in this Post-religious world. Kelly Monroe, once a visiting student at Harvard University in the United States, made a brief study of the evangelical history of the school. She discovered that the college’s earliest motto was *In Christi Glorium* – For Christ’s Glory. Other schools echoed a similar history in their once Christ centred origins:

Likewise, Yale was later founded on *Lux et Veritas* – Light and truth. And Dartmouth was founded as *Voces Clamantium in Deserto* – A voice crying in the wilderness. Similarly, Stanford, Duke, Wellesley, Columbia, Mount Holyoke, Tufts, the colleges in Cambridge and Oxford, Yen Si in Korea, St. Xavier in India – among many others – all were inspired by Jesus Christ (2000: 296).

Monroe in Carson continues to explain how Harvard’s founders placed the word *Veritas* on their shield, referring to Christ as the Truth –not a concept but a Person. The implementation of the Post Christian reality was that *Veritas* was no longer equivalent to Jesus Christ and His name has been removed from the University’s shield. As a result, when Billy Graham asked the former president what the biggest

problem with the students were, he answered “Emptiness” while the campus magazine proudly reported that “secularism is taught in every classroom”. To which Monroe in Carson acknowledges a new hope emerging for Christianity on campuses:

Though many good deeds are done here, students have begun to question the secular spirit of the age. They have begun to rethink the “century of despair” following Nietzsche’s pronouncement that God is dead. Last year the Christian Fellowship T-shirt read, “Nietzsche is dead.” It was signed, “God.” I believe that there is a new hunger for a new century (2000:298).

What is encouraging is to see that even though Christ has been systematically removed from college campuses and society in general, it seems as though an unfamiliarity with His story has intrigued this current generation to discover Him anew. There is a new hunger to know (the) Truth. Stuart Murray shares this sentiment by arguing that our greatest resource in Post-Christendom is Jesus, “Our priority must be to rediscover how to tell the story of Jesus and present His life, teaching, death and resurrection, recognising past attempts have seriously missed the mark” (2004:316).

Even though we are talking about rediscovering the Gospel story, we do not mean to add to it or take anything away, but instead present again the ancient truth God has been actively communicating since the beginning of time. The epilogue of Kelly Monroe’s book “Finding God at Harvard” is quoted in Carson, in it she shares the same sentiment when she expected to find something new and beyond Jesus, but instead found more of Him:

I have begun to see how the pure light of God’s truth refracts and falls in every direction with colour and grace. I found the memory of this truth in the colour of crimson, in the ivory yard gates and in the symbols on the college seal. I began to see Him in the work and eyes of fellow students, in rare books, in a friend’s chemistry lab, in recent astrophysical abstracts and in the lives and the legacies of the alumni who, whether living or beyond this life, would befriend and teach us (2000:359-360)

Monroe describes finding more of Jesus in a typical academic setting of a university campus. Finding common ground with the current culture around her. We, in communicating Jesus must also find common ground in the manner we communicate Him. We are after all, called by Him to be witnesses to the age and among the people He has called us to live. Partly to blame for the demise of Christianity and a distrust

of religion is our failure to be witnesses who honour Christ. Ravi Zacharias in Carson suggests that our witness of Jesus in this new era must not only be heard but also seen:

It must be an apologetic that is not merely heard but also seen. We live within a context that listens with its eyes. So much has happened over the last few years to discredit the carriers of the gospel that seeing is indeed going to be a precursor to believing (2000:42).

We are called to be witnesses, and speak truth in a culture which no longer thinks that it is absolute. The group of students, faculty and Professors who co-wrote the book, "Finding God at Harvard" engaged their academic culture by creating a space called the "Harvard Veritas Forum", they revived the original idea that Truth is a Person and students were allowed to ask questions and explore life and truth in relation to Christ. Instead of a forum which was a combative defence of Christianity, they came alongside students to answer questions they were no longer allowed to ask in their classrooms. They explained their ethos as unity in the diversity of an academic setting:

Again we want to fan into flames not the multiversity, but the university, which reunites disciplines, cultures and generations. We want to see the gospel as the only fabric of real integrity and the starting point for the living of life... We begin to see a unity to Truth, the beauty of Truth, within the diversity of cultures, disciplines and generations (Carson ed. 2000:301-302).

In Kelly Monroe's words, they wanted to go beyond the genre of critique and analysis, break away from the sterile academic language and become actual witnesses of Jesus in a hard place. Witnesses like the early church were in their culture.

During Christendom, the culture was, in essence, Christian because legislation and institutes found their foundation in Christendom. Stefan Paas wrote in his article "Religious Consciousness in a Post-Christian Culture", that Christians in America for example, will be called upon more frequently to communicate the legitimacy of some of the institutions found in their political structures, styles of communication and the justice system which have their origins in Christendom:

These institutions need legitimizing stories that articulate their logic, explaining and justifying them. And there is no question that these stories will have to be *Christian* stories. An important part of our missionary approach of Western culture is to keep telling these stories (2012:52).

In the past however, the communication translated mostly into creating and encouraging good citizens of those countries, as opposed to being witnesses for Jesus, as Douglas Harink contends in his article reviewing Rodney Clapp's best seller of 1996 "A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post Christian Society" and blames the church for being nothing more than a launching pad to push cultural, social and political agendas on society, "In fact, the church is largely responsible for this view of its role, and often affirms it as appropriate; that is, the church's task is seen to be to create good American citizens" (n;n).

In a post-religious context, the opportunity is to rediscover and then communicate Jesus Christ, and more of Him, as opposed to pushing political or institutionalized agendas. Harink goes on to say that the church in post Christendom should once again become the community of witnesses transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ since they learn to live by their own set of narratives and polity:

These are the means by which the church both enacts and becomes a specific, visible, and identifiable *culture*, a culture formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ... The faithfulness of the people of God is tested not only in the way it is formed as a people, but also in the way it encounters the surrounding society... It does so first by being what it is called to be—a way of life made possible by its participation in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen (n:n)

As these scholars clearly agree, the challenge of our age is only answerable by being true witnesses of the Person of Jesus Christ. Important, though, is in communicating with our world and finding common ground to break into a culture defined without Him, we must proclaim and not argue Christ. Instead we must be living demonstrations of how the Gospel story has become our story through our personal witness. As Ravi Zacharias in Carson admonishes Christians to not stop loving the people they are called to minister to, but rather after finding common ground and meeting their needs, we must move beyond emotion and rise to higher ground of expounding truth:

One of the things I've learned is that the antagonist will thank you for being patient and kind, not for being hostile or attacking...To that end, there is a narrative behind the love. Love does not come without either a story behind it

or a story ahead of it. The story is a gripping point of contact. But it is a story grounded in truth (2000:40).

1.1.3 Persecution

1.1.3.1 Challenge of Atheism

The world in which Atheists wants to live, is a world without the governance of God. The greatest argument against God is not necessarily against His Person, but against the boundaries an all knowing, all loving and all wise God has set, so that His people would not only survive but thrive. Mark E. Dever in Carson resolved that the boundaries set by God, was to teach His people about right and wrong:

In the Old Testament when God called out the Israelite nation, one of the reasons He gave all the rules there in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy about almost everything conceivable was in order to begin to teach people that there is nothing finally that is neutral to a holy God in a fallen world. He began to teach His people categories of right and wrong (2000:143).

Romans chapter one tells us that God had created every single human being with the ability to know the truth so that we are without excuse. We can know the truth of God that He reveals not only in His Word and through His son, Jesus, but also in all creation. Romans 1:32 confirms, "Although they know God's righteous decree...they not only continue to do these (evil) things, but also approve of those who practice them." Inherently we know the truth, but atheism is a vehement denial of the truth of God revealed through nature, the Law and His Son. Dever in Carson continues by saying that in order to communicate truth into our culture today, we need to help people experience their own consciences:

We need to know that unbelievers have consciences even if they don't think they do. Because they are made in the image of God, they do, and Christians should be confident of this fact... People need to grasp not only the theoretical concept of evil and wrong, but also the fact that they are evil and wrong. (2000:148)

The very outspoken atheist, Sam Harris, wrote two books in which he belittles believers for their faith in God and tries to convince them that the very notion of God

is ridiculous. Rather crudely, he fulminates against Christianity and Ravi Zacharias, in his response to Sam Harris's books "The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation", states rather bluntly that nothing is too sacred for Sam Harris to mock. I tend to agree with Zacharias and Dever that the problem isn't so much God, but the fact that people do not like to be told what to do or believe. Atheists have fully embraced a materialistic worldview with a focus on the tangible and the present. Consequently, in Harris's worldview human life has no value, since we are all merely the product of primordial soup, and our joys and sorrows have no effect on anyone else. In contrast Zacharias clarifies that Christianity teaches the ultimate value of every single life and the Atheist's insistence on seeing no moral order is only an attempt to remove God:

I strongly suspect that the real issue is not the absence of moral order in the world but the insistence on determining for oneself what is good and what is evil, in spite of what we intuitively know to be true... Beneath all the intellectual verbiage is a covert desire to have a world without God. Why? Aldous Huxley answered on behalf of all sceptics when he wrote that he wanted the world not to have meaning so that he would be set free from the moral demands of religion (2008:60-61).

And there we have it. Young people, specifically, are under the relentless harassment of the secular world, most notably in the world's leading secular academic institutions. Richard Dawkins, late professor at Oxford University and known as one of the most notable academics in Britain, if not the world, announces boldly "there is no God", a confession he took to his deathbed. Many would suggest that if he says there is no God, then surely there must be some truth in it? But as Zacharias points out, even Dawkins, one of Sam Harris' heroes admits that science – as an alternative to religion – does not have all the answers. For example, it has no methods or authority for deciding what is ethical – what is right or wrong. Therefore, the battle of the radical Atheists has been raging especially vociferously in the last few decades, to silence any opposing voices – in particular those of Christians. Harris, in boldly venerating the virtues of atheism, pointed out that nobody has ever seen atheists riot. To which Zacharias somewhat pointedly responded that Atheists do not need to riot, since they have systematically taken away the rights of those with opposing views in the academy. He legitimises his response by recalling an incident when visiting Oxford:

When I was at Oxford recently, I was told about an article written by Richard Dawkins in which he advocated that any prospective student with a creationist point of view should be refused admittance into Oxford. And he criticizes the intolerance of religion? Dawkins is a professor at Oxford, a university whose motto is, "The Lord is my Light". He has been given privileges to teach because of the Judeo-Christian ethic of tolerance. And now that he is in the driver's seat, he wishes to evict not just Christian faculty but even students who do not subscribe to his atheistic views. Ask any Christian academician how careful Christian professors need to be about acknowledging their faith in a classroom. Now Dawkins and others want the students to be silenced as well. Underneath their dangerous political correctness is an agenda to stifle all thought but their own (2008:65).

Atheism and secularism is the top-down mind-set infiltrating our post religious society. Just as Christendom shaped and formed the intellectual foundation of universities and institutions, secularism and atheism are now taking up the reigns. In response to this, our greatest task in this atheist led world is to continue teaching the value of human life as we are made in the image of God, that we have fallen short, since God has set His parameters and shown us how utterly incapable we are to fulfil them, and therefore He made our righteousness possible through Jesus Christ. In this regard Zacharias puts it thus, "To Sam Harris, a self-described atheist, human beings can be nothing more than their reducible chemicals. To believers in the person of Jesus, we are made in the image of God. Our sum total is greater than our parts" (2008: 108).

The Book of Hebrews beautifully illustrates how God had prepared the way since the beginning of time, set up laws and sacrifices which would ultimately be fulfilled in His Son, in order to restore sinful humanity to a holy God. Apart from His plan for redemption, Hebrews also illustrates the value of all human life, while the Roman society of the day taught that your rank in society also depicted your value. Slaves, for instance, had no more value than being the possession of their slave masters. As Rodgers explains in his book on Ancient Rome, human beings became one of Britain's main exports, while in Gaul chieftains could sell their slaves for a single amphora of wine and in Rome owning a slave or two was as common for the ordinary Roman as owning a car is to an ordinary citizen in today's society. While this borders on the unthinkable to our modern minds, Rodgers explains the cheapness of human life as it was apparent in Ancient Rome:

Attractive young boys or girls were sexually exploited... those who lacked in beauty were condemned to crushing work on the land or in mines. Many farm and mining slaves were appallingly treated. Pliny the Younger talks of chain-gangs of agricultural slaves who had iron collars forged around their necks. These collars, as uncomfortable as they were demeaning requested the finder to return the slave to its rightful owner like a dog. (2012: 226)

As I read on the practises in Ancient Rome, I can't help seeing the similarities in the seedy underworld of human trafficking prevalent in our modern society. Boys and girls as young as three or four years of age are being sold by their own families into slavery to a depraved market which unfortunately exists. In the Book of Hebrews God's value for human life is demonstrated in the priestly work of Christ. It portrays a God who does not only want to impose His laws on humanity, but also provides a way for us to abide by it, when He takes it upon Himself to fulfil it in our place. In a post-religious society, it is not about setting parameters for people to abide by, but instead revealing the love of a just and faithful Father who only wants the best for His children. "Only in the Judeo-Christian teaching do ethical imperatives follow from human worth, which has been imparted by God, not by human beings." (Zacharias 2008: 93)

1.1.3.2 Media and Devices

In 1977 Malcolm Muggeridge, renowned journalist, commentator for television and radio, lecturer and author, published a book called "Christ and the Media". Even in those days, Muggeridge wrote,

Future historians will surely see us as having created in the media a Frankenstein monster which no one knows how to control or direct, and marvel that we should have so meekly subjected ourselves to its destructive and often malign influence (2003:23).

Forty years later, and media has expanded and developed at such a speed that our heads are still spinning and trying to keep up with the technology developed over the past three years. Media and technology has become an undeniably massive factor in our lives, affecting us in ways that we are only now starting to discover. Mark Huddleston in his DVD lectures on the dangers of technology, so fittingly called "Digital Cocaine", points out that in countries where Wi-Fi technology is running miles ahead of the rest of the world – such as South Korea – device addiction has become a very real problem, and people have actually undergone rehabilitation treatment for it. This,

along with his report of a frustrated mother who had to call the police in fear of being harmed by her twelve-year old son, after she did nothing more than unplug his video game when he wouldn't respond to her promptings to come to the dinner table (Huddleston: 2015:n).

We are not suggesting that media is evil. Technological advancement is a gift to humanity, but like all gifts, when abused and used without parameters, can become a powerful weapon of destruction. As Muggeridge put it, it becomes a type of "Frankenstein monster".

We need to be aware that the media and their devices are shaping our young people more than anything else in our world. Kathy Koch, PhD in her book "Screens and Teens" explored the effects of media on youth. As she was researching she met a social network analyst who helped her understand the effect of the digital culture on youth, and concluded that technology is fast becoming the vice young people turn to when looking to have their deepest needs fulfilled:

God created every single person with the deep core needs of security, identity, belonging, purpose and competence which are all met and fulfilled in a relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. When people try to meet these needs in counterfeit or unhealthy ways, problems arise. Teens are increasingly turning more to technology and the digital culture to have their deepest core needs met and technology as a definite counterfeit does not work to meet those needs. (2015:16)

Apart from technology shaping our young people's minds and characters, the greater danger of constant access to the world at the touch of a screen, is perhaps the more sinister distraction from God and what He is calling them to. Many spiritual lives are dying slow deaths on couches in front of large television screens or small hand held devices as hours are spent posting, liking, trolling, scrolling, watching, playing and streaming endless amounts of data. Tony Reinke explored the ways our phones are changing us, and quoted modern philosopher, Douglas Groothuis who has been tracking the digital world's influence on Christians for more than twenty years. In his 1997 book, "The Soul and Cyberspace" he wrote, "It is difficult to serve God with our heart, soul, strength and mind when we are diverted and distracted and multi-tasking everything." (2017: 47)

Reinke goes on to say that the most detailed biblical theology of distraction and the pursuit of un-distraction are found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 7 where Paul speaks of the distractions of married life and applies it to our digital lives:

The clock on God's redemptive timeline is ticking. All distractions are measured by the reality that "the appointed time has grown short" and we are called to watchfulness... For those whose eyes see, Christ's return is so imminent, it potentially unclutters our lives of everything superficial and renders our vain distractions irrelevant. Our battle against distractions of this world – especially our digital world – is a heart war we can wage only if our affections are locked firmly on the glory of Christ. (2017: 49-50)

Again, we are not suggesting technology is evil. In fact, many Christians use it as a tool to grow spiritually. Bible Apps make reading our Bibles convenient and following Christian authors, musicians and leader's posts, streams and blogs, which can be extremely uplifting and encouraging.

We need to learn, and lead young people by our example of using technology to our benefit and not allow it to terrorize us into the destruction of everything we believe and hold dear. Technology users are human, fallen humans relating to a holy God. Our phones and what we search, watch and stream online ultimately reveal the interest of our hearts and as Reinke postulates, "To get into a phone is to peek into the interior of another's soul". He goes on to explain that God is eager to give us everything we need in this digital age and we must expect to also find grace for our digital failures and digital futures in the blood of His Son, "we need His grace as we evaluate the place of technology in our lives, the pros and cons and the trajectory of our eternal lives" (2017, 27).

In the Roman world of the book of Hebrews, evidences of a society also distracted and enamoured by immoral entertainment, was rife. Christians living in its day would have faced similar challenges we do in teaching our young people caution in engaging the culture. Some evidence of Roman life resembling our times becomes apparent as Rodgers explains:

By midday most Romans would have been up for six hours or more and would have hoped to accomplish their *negotium* (business)... Most drifted off in

search of entertainment on the warmest part of the day... Far more spectacular was the gladiatorial games, the races at the circus and the performances at the theatre, which diverted the Roman people... Few cults less dignified to the Roman Republic could be imagined than the orgiastic worship of Cybele a Phygrian fertility goddess, she was worshipped on mountaintops and underground... Her festival the Megalensia, was held annually from the 5th to the 10th of April, with religious processions, games and theatrical performances in the Circus Maximus... the open minded Emperor Claudius (ruled AD 41- 54) incorporated her cult into the official Roman pantheon. (2012:230 & 174)

One can only imagine the bloodthirsty and immoral practises that went along with the festivities of several Roman deities and the entertainment they kept themselves occupied with. When switching on the television a similar sentiment is evoked in view of modern society's unremitting exposure to a gory immoral media for the sake of entertainment and distraction.

In the words of Hebrews chapter 12, we need to shake and be shaken along with our young people so that "what can be shaken – created things – can be removed, and that which cannot be shaken may remain"... Clearly the early Christians of Hebrews faced similar challenges we do today in anticipating "a Kingdom that cannot be shaken and to respond to with gratitude hence the exhortation to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:27-29).

1.1.3.3 Extremism

In a world where religion has become somewhat alien, anyone who is wholeheartedly devoted is already quite extreme. The challenge is, maintaining a faith that perseveres in the face of many different persecutions and objections, without declaring holy war against the people of other religions and beliefs. Ravi Zacharias commented on the rise of extremism by referring to a statement made by the former President of Indonesia;

Indonesia's former president, Abdurahman Wahid, was very clear about where he lays blame for Islamic fundamentalism. He himself is moderate and pro-West in his thinking, taking his own life in his hands for being so. He specifically states that university students in his land are railing not against the democratic process but against the radical belief that scientific knowledge is the only knowledge – a belief that eradicates the soul. It is the enforced anti-God state of mind that is driving many into the hands of the other extreme. Isn't it ironic

that when Islam is in a position of power, Islamic beliefs are forced on everyone, and that when atheism has the upper hand, atheistic beliefs are enforced on everyone? Only in Christianity is the privilege given both to believe and to disbelieve without any enforcement. (2008: 63)

However, European Christian history does not always testify of an unforced faith. When Christendom was an empire, missionaries were replaced with soldiers armed with swords as entire nations were converted to Christendom forcibly. Murray illustrates how the use of the cross became a standard symbol for use in expanding the Christian Empire through Christian crusades:

No longer a sign of self-sacrifice and love, it was now a rallying point for armies shedding the blood of others, albeit in the Name of the one who shed His blood on the cross... "Taking up the cross" now implied readiness not to die but to kill... This was a massive, and largely uncontested, symbolic change that emptied the cross of its challenge and transformed it from a sign of shame and weakness into an insignia of honour, wealth and coercive power, and made possible the blessing of weapons in the name of Christ (2004:92&94)

Christians are now the ones being persecuted. If not by the unbelief and ridicule from the secular Atheistic world with its low morals and ever deprecating values, then, as Christians in Muslim countries, by paying with their lives for professing that Allah is not god and Mohammed is not his only prophet. It's easy to react in anger and use the symbol of the cross as a call to arms, as our ancestors did, but the Lord Jesus would command us to love those who hate us, care for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

In the book of Hebrews, the Christians were being persecuted and antagonized by their communities for their faith in Christ. The encouragement from the book of Hebrews to the Christians undergoing these persecutions was to spur one another on toward love and good deeds and to not give up meeting together, so they may encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). In Hebrews 11 the Christians are further encouraged to persevere in their faith by looking at the example of Bible characters, real men and women who kept their faith in view of doubt and persecution. Our young people need to be encouraged in the same way, through Biblical examples, through the testimonies of modern day believers who obeyed Christ by loving their enemies, and remained faithful to the Lord until the end, regardless of the cost. One such a

book is a book called “I am N”, written collectively from the testimonies of Christians who made it through the persecution of the extremist jihad group called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria from 2013-2015. As Hebrews 12 states, we are not on a leisure jog, we are running a race, and for that we need extreme faith.

1.1.3.4 Pluralism

Walking into the showroom of an ultra-modern popular furniture shop, my attention was drawn towards the culture of integrating aspects of religious history into making an interior space interesting. On the wall hung a Mexican rendition of a crucified Christ, while on the solid wood carved Indian coffee table with the elephant head of the god Ganapati, stood a Buddha in a water feature tulip. On the other wall hung the weapons of a Samurai soldier, paying omen to martial arts. On the carpet there was Arabic script, written on it was the names of Allah. In another part of the shop was a shelf full of statues – a Virgin Mary stood next to the Indian goddess Shiva and one can literally make your pick of deities to decorate your living room.

In a post-Christian world, secularisation has perhaps taken up the reigns but it has not been able to squelch the need for the spiritual. As Murray observed:

Spirituality and religious beliefs, in remarkably diverse forms, have flourished and we can now identify a counter-process of de-secularisation challenging secular assumptions. Neopaganism, westernised oriental religions, ‘new age’ ideas, Islam, new religious movements, interest in the occult and other expressions of spirituality and religion are undermining any claim that post-Christendom is secular. Some may be ‘designer spirituality’, resistant to institutional expression and eschewing truth claims. (2004:11)

In the Roman society which makes up the setting for the book of Hebrews, it is clear that the early Christians faced a similar challenge in the face of a pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, not to mention the institution of Imperial worship of the emperor of Rome. Rodgers offers the following illustration:

The Romans had many gods and, like most other polytheists, normally accepted those of other peoples... From Augustus’ time on, the worship of the emperor, whose *genius* was the goddess of Rome, was encouraged...The

Jews were exempt because of the antiquity of their religion, but Christians suffered for their refusal to worship the emperor. (2012:165)

Romans could choose the god to whom they chose to worship based on their set of needs. Physicians may have paid omen to Minerva the goddess of doctors, musicians and craftsmen, while Centurions and military officials would pay homage to Mars, the god of war. Barren women would pay homage to the Vesta, the goddess of domestic hearth and fertility or those who lived only for pleasure and wine would claim to worship Bacchus, god of wine and ecstasy.

Now in our post-Christendom world, the idea of picking a god to suit our needs have once again become the popular fashion. Netland and Johnson in Carson made an observation that globalization and the complexity of trying to interconnect a worldwide society is why “designer faith” has become such a widespread practice:

Globalization – the increasingly complex manner in which institutions and patterns of contemporary life are interconnected worldwide, transcending national and cultural boundaries – is changing how we perceive those who are culturally and religiously different... Bryan Turner observes, “The multiplication of religious faiths in a multicultural society has in this everyday world a profoundly relativizing effect.” As the number of religious options multiply, the relative authority of any individual tradition seems to diminish (2000:53)

The challenge for us, is teaching our youth that there is something significant, unique and superior about Jesus Christ, when there are so many other options and opinions to choose from. In fact, teaching this makes us seem intolerant of other people’s culture and traditions, which further alienates the world from Christians and provides opposition for Christians to live out their faith in truth and with grace. David Kinnaman studied how people outside the Christian faith perceive Christians and he found the following:

The most common “favourable” impression is that Christianity teaches the same basic idea as other religions; more than four out of every five young outsiders embrace this description... only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that the labels, “love, respect, hope and trust” describe Christianity. A minority of outsiders perceives Christianity as genuine and real, as something that makes sense and as relevant to their lives. (2007:27)

Persecution in the form of peer pressure to conform to a more pluralistic spirituality is something our young people are once again faced with, as the Christians were in early Rome for refusing to worship the emperor. Our young people can be taught from the examples and teaching in the book of Hebrews to a group of Christians who experienced the same challenges for their faith. The prime preserving factor is in teaching and living out the superiority of Jesus and the necessity for faith in Him alone.

1.2 The Post Christian Society

A recent article in BBC News about “Assemblies” confirmed my realization that our post-modern world is rapidly speeding towards a state of self-destruction and implosion not boding well for young Christians. Even though the article was based on the UK context, a similar trend has been emerging all over Europe and previously (colonized) Christian nations. This movement is the debunking of any religious belief, and instead, a coming together of people to celebrate life in a secular world.

The article in question opens by saying, “For the first time, more than half of the people in the UK do not identify as religious”. Staggering statistics from surveys taken follows in claiming 53% of people out of a survey taken from 2,942 adults by the National Centre for Social Research identify as “non religious”. This identification was most prevalent among young people aged between 18-25 of whom 71% claimed no religious affiliation. Other surveys taken revealed a similar decline:

The figures, shown to BBC Radio 5 live, reveal a downward trend for religious belief in the UK. When the national centre's British Social Attitudes survey began in 1983, 31% of respondents said they had no religion. A random sample of adults were involved in the latest survey and they were asked whether they regarded themselves as belonging to a particular religion. Almost two in three 25 to 34 year olds said they were non-religious, while 75% of people aged 75 and over said they were religious. (BBC Digital News:2017:n)

Despite the disconnect from religious affiliation, that seems to be synonymous with our current culture, a strange phenomenon started to emerge called, “Assemblies”. One of these groups who meet in London on Sundays, identify themselves as a secular congregation who celebrate life. One of their members is a 26-year-old travel journalist. When asked if she was religious she answered, “Not at all, I like the fact

that a community can come together without it being about religion.” (BBC Digital News:2017:n). This trend is not only evident among previously religious Christians, but other religions are experiencing a similar decline. As evident in the response from another member of the Assembly, “Mitsky 38, was raised as a Jain – an ancient Indian religion – but now considers himself more atheist.” When interviewed by BBC Live 5’s Rosanna Pound Woods he stated:

Most religions have good basic principles, but certain religions take them maybe in a different direction which I didn't really tend to agree with, I was heavily involved in that community here in London and I do miss it, which is why I was looking for something else (BBC Digital News:2017:n).

Mitsky puts a voice to an emerging consensus about religion in our global society. Religion has come into the spotlight as atrocities are committed in the name of and because of religious differences. One stark reality that is still very much in development, is the on going war in Syria. Starting in 2006, it was the development and gradual ascent of a conservative Islamic government depriving and oppressing its subjects’ basic human rights. Ultimately these bled out to peaceful protests in 2009 and 2010. After numerous political arrests and disappearances from democratic opposition parties, by 2011 President Bashar Al Assad took militaristic approaches against his own people to stifle the unrest. Fast forward to 2013 and the Assad regime resorted to using chemical weapons against their own people. As many fled and rebel groups started forming, the extremist Islamic movement ISIS swept in from Iraq, and by the end of 2013-2014 they were taking advantage of a nation left to not only fend for itself, but defend itself against its own leaders. ISIS swept through Syria terrorizing as far as they went and established their Caliphate. A human rights watch article by Lama Fakhri, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch was asked to report on the progress and state of the people in Latakia countryside in Syria on November 5th 2013 wrote:

While the number of sectarian attacks increase in this war, the Sunni, Alawite, Shia, Christian, Kurd, and Druze civilians across the country who have been targeted or are victims of indiscriminate attacks speak with one voice. They describe arbitrary detention, hostage-taking, the agony of not knowing, living with permanent injuries, and picking up the pieces of their shattered lives as refugees, as displaced persons (Human Rights Watch Digital 2013:n).

A few months prior to Lama Fakhri's report another journalist, Tom Porteous, who also reports for Human Rights Watch wrote an article published in the Los Angeles Times on 18 July 2013 called, "God and Intolerance". In his article he not only highlighted the religious intolerances in Syria, but also included reports from other countries;

The last month hasn't been a good one for religious tolerance. As Egypt teetered on the edge of chaos following the military's ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, unknown assailants killed a Coptic Christian priest in Sinai and Muslim extremists attacked churches in Minya and burned down Christian homes in Luxor. In Pakistan on June 30, a suicide bomber killed 28 people, including three children, in an attack on Hazara Town, a Shiite area of the city of Quetta. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an extremist Sunni group, claimed responsibility for what was just the latest in a string of sectarian atrocities in Pakistan... Vicious sectarianism is not solely afflicting Muslim countries — witness the attacks by monk-led Buddhists on Myanmar's Rohingya minority and the growing Islam-phobia in Europe. But the trend is particularly prevalent — and alarming — in the Muslim world, affecting areas where people have lived together for centuries. The violence is tearing communities apart and fuelling political instability and horrific rights abuses. And authoritarian governments are using it as a reason to resist popular demands for political rights (Human Rights Watch Digital 2013:n).

In view of the world's growing distrust for anything religious, it's no wonder young people like the two Londoners who attend the "Assemblies" are seeking community without religion. London itself has seen its fair share of terror attacks under the threat of extreme Islamists, along with the rest of Europe who have seen war terrorized families flee into their borders. The Western world have stood witness to their own young people being lured away to join extremist groups, and are terrified of what their own children are now capable of upon their return. If they ever do return.

In spite of all of this, the honest admission of both the congregants from the "Assemblies" also reveal that even though they do not wish to associate with any religion, they seek community, fellowship and relationship. The foundation of our Christian faith is the very thing they seek. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die on a cross for our sins, raised from the dead on the third day, and pouring out His Holy Spirit into us He re-established community, fellowship and relationship between Himself, a holy God, and lost depraved humans. How tragic that now as the article in BBC reveals, four out of ten people who grew up in religious homes now claim no religious affiliation at all.

But as the church and Christianity is marginalised in modern society, the challenge to those who still follow Christ is to reintroduce Him to those seeking young people who are, though alienated by religion, still openly searching for connection and faith. The decline of religion in society has left a door open for people to receive. I agree with retired Rev Paul Bayes who responded to the revelation of the BBC article:

The figures bring a "continuing challenge to the churches" in "a skeptical and plural world". But he said people's hearts and minds remained "open". "Saying 'no religion' is not the same as a considered atheism. People see the point of faith when they see the difference faith makes. We need to keep finding ways to show and tell those who say they have 'no religion' that faith - faith in the God who loves them still - can make that life-transforming difference for them and for the world. (BBC Digital News:2017:n).

How can we tell young people that a God they no longer care to hear about loves them? The answer is by making disciples of those who still follow Him. Beth Moore's blog entry on the Living Proof Ministries website on the 7th of November 2017 resonates with truth when she states:

This is a plea for an awakening to the demands for responsible discipleship in the generation that has been entrusted to us, for training up and equipping strong, able Jesus-followers, sturdy living stones, tenderized by the love of Jesus, strengthened by His divine power (Moore 2017:n).

1.3 My own conclusion to the subject

In a blog entry on 7 November 2017 on the Living Proof website by renowned Bible scholar and teacher, Beth Moore, she expounded that followers of Christ have been called for this appointed time on earth and that leaders, teachers, mentors and communicators of the Gospel needed to embrace the responsibility of equipping believers for the appointed time. Consequently she admitted to making increasingly strong adjustments to her most recent Bible Study curriculum to encourage and cultivate disciples who would "answer the call to steadfastness, sacrifice, strength, love, faith and defiant joy in times of extreme distress" (Moore; 2017).

For some time now the Lord has been equipping me with a similar desire, to create a Bible Study curriculum for youth that would cultivate, teach and encourage faithful

followers of Jesus as we enter times of extreme distress in our world history. Young people today, as new Christians did in the early years of the church, face opposition to their faith in various forms. Their adversaries range from physical persecution and bullying, to subtle calls from what are popular trends in society to conform to world standards – attacks on their intellect as the secular world and sciences try to explain away God.

Their adversaries are also internal. The battering coming from their own selfish characters, fuelled by screens they can hold in the palm of their hands, or that have taken over their families and social lives. It serves only to further fuel the ever-growing narcissism that it promotes. I do not even need to mention the dark world of entertainment, pornography and the dark web – a kingdom of Satan literally at their fingertips in the privacy of their rooms behind closed doors, with their parents ignorantly sleeping in a room across the hallway. In the midst of all these pressures, they are not equipped to deal with what has befallen them.

I agree with David Platt's statement in his article "Counter Culture",

In a world where everything revolves around yourself – protect yourself, promote yourself, comfort yourself, take care of yourself – Jesus says, 'Crucify yourself. Put aside your self preservation in order to live for God's glorification, no matter what that means for the culture around you' (Platt n:n).

The days of "sweet" church and youth group gatherings answering the growing call from society to meet the needs of consumerism, always thrilling yet including just the right amount of good scriptures to promote a good life, and telling youth to be nice, is over. A time has already dawned where the world is becoming increasingly depraved, broken and confused, and pampered disciples will not be able to stand in the day of testing.

Our commission to be witnesses for Jesus has not changed, not since the early church faced opposition and extermination by their societies. And just like those early church members we need to be in our world but not of it. Our current culture is no longer a comfortable place for Christians, something Platt affirms,

Christ's call in our lives is not to comfort in our culture. Christ in us calls us to counter our culture. Not to quietly sit and watch evolving cultural trends, and

not so subtly shift our views amid changing cultural tides, but to courageously share and show our convictions through what we say and how we live, even and especially when these convictions contradict the popular positions of our day (Platt n:n).

Our faith requires us to be planted on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, anchored firmly in who He is and what He has called us to be, while the world is being swayed back and forth by whatever is trending at that particular moment in time.

There is the reality of a broken world that is only becoming more so, but most of our youth are so distracted by television series or online video games, that they have become completely removed from their faith in Christ, and the challenges they will encounter in the world because of it. If they ever do get out into the world and have actual physical contact with other people, as opposed to interaction with others through the glass on the screens of their devices, many of them have no idea what it means to be a disciple who relentlessly follows Jesus. Further challenging their faith and devotion to Christ are temptations they are confronted with from inside their bedrooms behind closed doors, which threatens to taint their public witness of the faith they profess and lure them away from Jesus, the only One who can enable them to stand up against it.

Living in a peaceful country in the Middle East, I have often encountered young men and woman who seem to have recently graduated from High School. They walk around the malls with their signature crew cut hairstyles, synonymous with military service. Soldiers. Soldiers who came to fight in a war where they may not even be the youngest fighters, since their enemy combatants are often children of war, who have not known another reality but war since birth. Young people who came to fight who are in a “friendly” Middle Eastern country are becoming acclimatized and prepared for the battlefield. I watch these young people enjoy the creature comforts they are accustomed to, from Burger King to the latest Marvel movies before their deployment to who knows where, having to face who knows what.

And I can't help thinking to myself that these teenagers have been prepared for war. Months of military training have prepared them, tested them and shaped their characters, and I know no amount of training could possibly completely prepare them

for what they may actually have to face, but it might certainly and ultimately save their lives. Lately I look at our Christian youth with the same sentiment. I'm not suggesting that as youth pastors, mentors, leaders and teachers we are training soldiers for war, or am I? Haven't we been called to witness in a world that is growing in hostility towards us? Haven't we been called to equip others to be witnesses in that same broken dark world?

We can't foresee the actual opposition our young people may have to face in the future, but we can certainly and should certainly prepare young disciples of Jesus to be able to stand and persevere in their faith when the enemy threatens to murder it. We cannot raise young people the old Colonial way of becoming members of an organization or institution. We cannot raise Christians who are only so nominal and whose faith amounts to going to church on Sundays and special occasions. We cannot raise Christians who do not know their Saviour Jesus Christ.

Instead we need to raise disciples, who like soldiers have been prepared to persevere, who have tested characters who are able to shine the glory of Jesus squarely in the face of an increasing darkness. Disciples, who through their own process of faith and growing relationship with Jesus, commit to knowing Him and making Him known despite whatever adversity they may face. Disciples, who do not tarnish their witness because of hidden sins but know and experience forgiveness and mercy through Jesus Christ. Disciples, who have been trained not to depend on their own strength but rely effectively on the power of the Holy Spirit in them. In training young disciples, we need to expose them to situations that would test their characters and test their faith in a "friendly environment" so they would ultimately as Oswald Chambers wrote, cultivate a "Christ-confidence as opposed to self-confidence".

I agree with Beth Moore who admitted to make adjustments to her most recent Bible Study curriculum to serve this very purpose. The calling to make disciples is not something new, but rather the way Christians in the early church were equipped to be witnesses and disciples. In fact, Jesus Himself trained His disciples before He sent them out in Matthew 10 and Luke 10, and commissioned all believers to do the same. As Beth Moore writes:

This is the heritage of New Testament believers; they were trained – not just told but trained... To remember Christ's death. To live out authentic resurrection life that could not be explained in natural terms. They were taught to battle demonic powers and principalities. They were taught how to grieve with hope. They were taught how to repent and be restored. How to turn from the sin that was haemorrhaging their witness and their tenacity in Christ. They were trained in prayer and taught how to keep the faith. They were taught to anticipate with great joy the vivid life awaiting them in Christ on the other side of death and that these are mere shadows compared to the substance to come (Moore 2017:n).

In taking up the call to make disciples I am not suggesting any new strategies or discipleship paradigms. Instead, I am suggesting we look back at the manner in which our faith heroes have done before us, like the author of Hebrews did in chapter 11, when normal people who were called by God, put their faith into action. Our training tools should match the opposition of its day. Our young people do not need to be told about being disciples; they need to be taught how to be disciples. And Bible study curriculum is a good place to start.

CHAPTER 2: Describing a Narrative Based Bible Study

2. Describe the method of Narrative Based Bible Study

A Narrative Based Bible Study, is a method of analysing the Biblical text's literary elements by asking the following questions;

2.1 Rhetorical Analysis;

2.1.1 What is the author's original intent and message?

The message of Hebrews is Christological. The author is conveying that Jesus has come as the fulfilment of all the things so long expected by the Jews. Jesus radiates, as the conveyed message, the very glory of God (Hebrews 1:1-3). Jesus is greater than the angels and heavenly beings (Hebrews 1:4-7); He is the Son of God (Hebrews 1:8-14); greater than Moses (Hebrews 3:1-7); a royal High Priest (Hebrews 5:1-10; Hebrews 7); and the bearer of the new covenant promise from God (Hebrews 6:13-21, Hebrews 8). Access to God is no longer earned through performing rituals, but because of the work of Jesus Christ and the guiltless blood He shed. Intimate communion with God is made possible and believers have gained access into the very holy of holies where the LORD presides and continues to intercede for us (Hebrews 9-10:22).

The Passion Translation Bible author Brian Simmons states in his introduction to the book of Hebrews, "Jesus is the theme of Hebrews. You must learn from Him and draw closer to Him in order to understand the depth of this book, for Jesus is the language of God, all of the Bible points to Him" (YouVersion Bible Application). The heart of the book of Hebrews beats Christ, and all parts of Hebrews is designed and formed around Jesus as its main body. Milton affirms how a book can only be fully grasped once we have identified the main theme or as Milton ascribes it, the scope, in his book on Biblical Hermeneutics:

The plan of a book, moreover, is most intimately related to its scope. The one cannot be fully apprehended without the other. Even where the scope is formally announced, an analysis of the plan will serve to make it more clear. A writer who has a well-defined plan in his mind will be likely to keep to that plan,

and make all his narratives and particular arguments bear upon the main subject (1999:108).

For the purpose of our studies, we have resolved that there is no other book better equipped for encouraging young people to continue and persevere in their faith. We have already ascertained that we do not wish to make changes to the plan or suggest new modules of discipleship training, but simply to present Christ and re-introduce Him into a culture and society which is no longer familiar with Him. The book of Hebrews is laden with imagery, themes and motifs introducing Christ as supreme, and in a world where a pluralist worldview thrives - similar to the Greco-Roman world in which the book of Hebrews first made its circulation – its contribution remains inestimable.

Furthermore, we have set out to prove that the circumstances of persecution the original recipients of Hebrews experienced are similar to the alienation and continued possibility of legal prosecution Christians experience from our modern culture. The message of Hebrews came as a response when the larger narrative of God's redemptive story, came in contact with the realities of the Hebrew Christian's world, as Bar-Efrat relates in his book "The Art of Biblical Narrative";

At the centre of the plot there is almost always a conflict or a collision between two forces, whether these be two individuals, a person and his or her inner self, a person and an institution, custom or outlook, or an individual and a superhuman force, such as God or fate (1992:94).

Central to the message of the book of Hebrews is, therefore also the incentive to encourage Christians in their faith toward Christ. The Hebrew writer is faced with the challenge of a collision between the Hebrew Christians' faith in Christ and the threat of persecution threatening believers to turn their backs on Christ. The writer's motive therefore is to encourage and instruct these believers, reminding them of the larger narrative, with its beginning and end in Christ and His completed work. The book of Hebrews represents the climax of this plot, as the instruction and encouragement borne on these pages occur in response to the collision which have taken place of the Hebrew Christians, with Judaism and the Greco-Roman society in which they existed.

Peter O'Brien in his commentary "A letter to the Hebrews" further develops this thought as he applies George Guthrie's structure to the book of Hebrews. O'Brien points out

how Guthrie's outline suggests the entire book is divided into expositions and exhortations: The expositions based upon an argument for Christ, and the exhortations as warnings and encouragements toward faith in Christ;

The discourse is woven together as a unity with the two threads of exhortation and exposition forming one coherent work... Guthrie's structure actually yields helpful visualization. By placing a distinct and visible emphasis on the exposition and exhortation, he enables us to see the two lines moving in concert with one another as the epistle progresses (2010:31).

Considering all of this, we can safely draw the conclusion that Hebrews' message conveys the supremacy of Christ while it also poses hortatory aims for believers not to turn away from their faith in Christ.

2.1.2 Is the author attempting to instruct, inspire, defend or persuade the audience?

The author is attempting to instruct and persuade the audience to persevere in their faith in Christ. The Hebrew Christians were getting "cold feet" as well as turning away from Christ in the face of persecution and alienation from society, their communities and families. David Pawson in "Unlocking the Bible" points out that Christianity was outlawed during this time, while Judaism was not:

Their homes were being vandalized, possessions confiscated, some were imprisoned, the Jewish believers could get out of trouble by going back to synagogue. At this time Christianity was illegal but Judaism was legal with synagogues officially 'registered' (2015:1113).

We must clarify that the audience in mind here are the Jewish Christians residing in Rome. After weighing many of the suggestions for the destination of Hebrews, we have come to agree with several scholars, including Morris in Gaebelien who came to the resolve that, "There seems to be more reasons for connecting the letter with Rome than with any other place" (1981:5). The tension between Jews and Christians gained momentum to such an extent in Rome, that Emperor Claudius in AD49 ordered the expulsion of Jews. John Bowker in his Handbook of the Bible refers to the Roman historian Suetonius' record of the expulsion of the Jews "and attributes it to Jewish disturbance at the instigation of Chrestus" (2004:403). O'Brien further expounds on Suetonius' record;

According to the well-known account of Suetonius, Claudius expelled the Jews because 'they were constantly indulging in riots at the instigation of Chrestus.

The name Chrestus which was common among Romans, is not attested as a Jewish name, and is probably a variant of Christos. It is likely that disorder broke out in one or more synagogues where some Jews claimed that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 6:9-15; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19; 18:12-17) (2010:16).

He continues by illuminating the fact that even though very little is known about the expulsion under Emperor Claudius, much of the persecution mentioned in the book of Hebrews could account for the type of abuse these Jewish Christians had to endure.

From the implicit evidence about the type of persecution suffered we have drawn the same conclusion about the recipients of Hebrews, referring to specific passages that give some indication to what they were suffering (Hebrews 10:32; 11:25-26; 13:13). More specifically, Hebrews also addresses its hearers to recall some of the things they have had to suffer, which further indicates that the recipients were no longer “in exile” but most probably rather refers to the community of Jewish Christians who have returned to Rome after the death of Emperor Claudius in AD54. Bowder explains, in more depth, some of the history and resulting difficulties within the Christian community in Rome which may have resulted in conflict, divisions and eventually, persecution;

Perhaps the early Christian house churches of Rome arose in connection with Jewish synagogues, but they may also have been established by Gentiles who had no connection with the synagogue. Nonetheless, the deportation of Jewish Christians would have increased the number of Gentile Christians within Roman Christian circles. This may have fostered some forms of ethnic tension within Christian circles (Rom 11:17-21), not least upon the return of the Jewish Christians after the edict had been repealed by the death of Claudius in 54CE (2004:402-403).

David Pawson in “Unlocking the Bible” points out that Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome as response to the tension and divisions caused by returning Jewish Christians from expulsion (2015:1019). This same community of returning Jewish Christians are the recipients of the book of Hebrews. Apart from having to rediscover their place among the Gentile Christians, the pressure to abandon their faith in Christ would have intensified upon their return, since their faith was not without consequence, but actually led to their expulsion in the first place. The result was an increased persecution toward Jewish Christians, as Pawson clarifies, “Jewish believers could return to synagogue and so take their families out of persecution – the only way for them to get back to synagogue was to deny their faith in Christ.”

(2015:1114) The book of Hebrews therefore was born out of these tensions and the writer wrote an eloquent book of instruction, attempting to dissuade its recipients from denying Christ.

2.1.3 What rhetorical techniques does the author use to achieve these goals?

The book of Hebrews has been described by some scholars as one of a kind. Its themes are unparalleled by any other New Testament Scripture, bridging the gap between Old Testament types and the New Testament's fulfilment through Christ. In Carson, Moo and Morris's introduction to the New Testament, they praise the contribution of the book of Hebrews to the whole of God's Word, "The nature of typology, the understanding of prophecy that goes far beyond merely verbal prediction, the interplay between exegesis and specific texts, and the constraints of redemptive history are all exemplified in Hebrews". The consistency of these themes, they go on to say, "provides many of the working elements for developing biblical theology" (1992:406).

Though the book of Hebrews is unique, I agree with O'Brien who says it is not isolated apart from the rest of the New Testament, but instead supports and is supported by other Christian writings, "it has affinities with a number of Christian writings including Paul's letters, Stephen's speech in Acts and 1 Peter... These affinities show that Hebrews is located within the mainstream of Christian tradition" (2010:43). He persists that the literary style itself, master rhetorical features;

Hellenistic literary devices, such as repetition, anaphora, parallelism, rhetorical questions, direct address to the listeners, oratorical imperative, "hook words" and the like were employed by the author as he composed his "word of exhortation" to be read aloud in the congregation to which it was addressed (2010:24).

Repetition and comparison of themes, such as Christ's superiority over the Old Covenant, prophets and heavenly beings attest to the inclusion of Hebrews in Biblical canon. Christ's fulfilment of the Old Covenant and sacrificial system, the repetition of the motif of Jesus as our High Priest, the concept of faith and persevering in faith, the

example of faith heroes and the exhortation towards faith, are all recurring themes throughout the book of Hebrews.

Finally, heaven and the ultimate reality of heaven is a culminating theme in the book of Hebrews, most striking, is the reference made in Hebrews chapter 12 about entering into God's presence, not as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai when God's presence made them tremble with terror, but as a people exultantly ascending Mount Zion, amidst the sound of thousands of voices in worship, to a new Jerusalem and the city of the living God. Pawson points out an important rhetorical focus for the author of Hebrews is to constantly make Jesus the focus, "Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Mediator of a New Covenant and Sufferer outside the camp on behalf of His people" (2015:1131). The book of Hebrews, rhetorically and semantically, seems to pull Christ back into focus demanding action toward faith and intimacy in response.

O'Brien however points out that the book of Hebrews goes a step further with classical rhetorical techniques, and explains, rather pointedly, how two rhetorical styles are undeniably identifiable in the book. The first is, *Deliberative Rhetoric* which urges its recipients toward a future course of action which will be beneficial while avoiding that which will be harmful, "The listeners are to set a course that will lead to future rewards (4:11; 6:18; 10:36; 12:1-2), each exposition turns to exhortation and the entire last section of the discourse calls for a commitment from the hearers to act in certain ways rather than others" (2010:25). From the implicit biblical evidence, it is clear that the entire book of Hebrews fits the description of exhortation, followed by an urging towards faith and commitment.

The second rhetoric is *Epidictic*; meaning that something is incontestable because it had been proved. O'Brien clarifies the manner in which it is employed in the book of Hebrews:

Hebrews is concerned to reinforce the present values of the listeners by commending what is praiseworthy and condemning what is shameful. Hebrews urges its listeners to hold fast to the faith they already profess (3:6; 4:14; 10:23; 35-39; 11:11). It employs honour and shame language, and uses the device of comparison, which is a frequent feature of epidictic oratory, to show Christ's superiority to persons and institutions from the Old Testament (2010:25).

From the opening line of Hebrews 1:1-2, it employs an epideictic rhetoric when it states the proven facts, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets, at many times in various ways, but in these days he has spoken to us by His Son whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe”; from these opening lines, Christ’s superiority is communicated as being incontestable. Hebrews clearly includes elements of both rhetorical styles, as O’Brien states, “For those who remain committed to God and Christ, Hebrews is epideictic. But for those tending to drift away from the faith, it is deliberative” (2010:26).

2.2 Narrative Analysis

Remaining true to the the implicit narrative of Hebrews, our intent is to construct an imaginative world relating to the book of Hebrews. With regard to our Bible Study curriculum for youth, our aim is to create a fictional narrative based upon the historical/biblical facts surrounding Hebrews with the intent on making it appeal to a modern audience, through characters they can relate to while teaching them the theological basis and exhortation towards faith so eloquently communicated in the book of Hebrews itself. Robert Kolb explored how Luther often engaged with Scripture in a similar manner in his book “Luther and the Stories of God”,

Luther not only added his own narrative elaborations into the exposition of a text. He also used the biblical accounts as the framework for his own catechesis, repeating the text’s story and then making clear its significance for his readers or hearers, with a down-to-earth elucidation of the words and concepts, making the point that the story seemed to him to illuminate (2012:49-50).

Kolb elaborates on Luther’s method by pointing out how Luther bridged the divide between the hearer and various aspects of the story, usually in one or all of these three elements: events, characters and settings. A misunderstanding of any of these three can often cause current listeners to disengage with the original narrative since time, culture, and in the case of biblical narrative, the exclusion of these specifics – as we find with the book of Hebrews; “The challenge the preacher faces are the untold details that hearers and readers long to know. As lecturer and preacher, Luther took a good deal of freedom in imaginatively reconstructing the stories, adding details of description or circumstance” (2012:49).

The details we wish to add with our curriculum will be based upon our researched findings from within and without the book of Hebrews. Milton, in his consideration of biblical hermeneutics, comments on the need for every interpreter of scripture to rely on their imagination to transport themselves into the soul of the past, yet to do so with caution:

It has usually happened that men of powerful imagination have been unsafe expositors. An exuberant fancy is apt to run away with the judgment, and introduce conjecture and speculation in place of valid exegesis. The chastened and disciplined imagination will associate with itself the power of conception and of abstract thought, and be able to construct, if called for, working hypotheses to be used in illustrations or arguments (1999:24).

Thus for the purpose of our studies, all evidence whether historical, biblical or extra biblical will be taken into account in order to remain true to the interpretation of the text.

2.2.1 Who are the characters in the story and what roles do they play?

Several possibilities have been explored in identifying the recipients and participants of the book of Hebrews but none of them were explicitly introduced. With the exception of a reference to Timothy who is referred to as “brother” and the implication that the recipients have personal knowledge of his release from prison and an impending visit (Hebrews 13:23). The very next verse intimates that, “those from Italy send you their greetings”. These being the only identifiable groups of people mentioned in the book itself.

The title however, explicitly implies that the recipients are Hebrews, and the contents of the book further supports this fact. As Morris in Gaebelien reports, “I find it hard to think that a writing that moves so much in the area of Jewish ritual was in the first instance intended for non-Jews and it is conjecture that the title “To the Hebrews” was not original. The evidence favours it” (1981:5). Apart from the original recipients being undoubtedly Hebrew, there is insurmountable evidence to support that they, indeed, resided in Rome.

In view of this, we refer to David Pawson’s solidly convincing argument in this regard in his introduction of “Unlocking the Bible”. He elaborates on the church plant which

has already been in existence when Paul and Peter visited Rome, and he points to the fact that Roman Jews were present at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 1-3, some undoubtedly converted and filled with the Holy Spirit, returned to Rome to plant a church. Before the Jews were expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in AD 54, the church in Rome consisted dominantly of Hebrew Christians. Paul's letter to the Romans was partially written with the purpose to re-integrate Hebrew Christians into a dominantly Gentile congregation upon the Hebrew Christians' return from exile to Rome (2003:1018-1019).

Hebrews on the other hand was written with the purpose to encourage Hebrew Christians not to abandon their faith and return to Judaism in avoiding persecution under Nero's law, which outlawed Christianity but legalized Judaism (2013:1113). Pawson also specifies the type of persecution the Christians suffered with reference to internal Biblical evidence; from Hebrews 10:32-34 and 12:4 it is evident that the persecution has not yet led to bloodshed, however, homes and businesses were being vandalized or confiscated and some Christians were imprisoned.

Bowker in his 'Handbook of the Bible' adds vivid detail to the outline of the community of Jewish Christians residing in Rome;

In the first century CE, there were about 40,000-50,000 Jews in Rome. Most came from the lower classes and were probably brought to Rome as slaves. Since much of the early Christian mission was among Jews, Christianity probably took root in Rome by the conversion of Jews and God-fearers associated with the synagogues (2004:204).

As the rift between Jew and Christian grew, Bowker explains how House Churches came into existence as a result of the conflict that arose between the two; they emerged from the synagogues, since, as Bowker put it, "the emphasis and practises of the new movement could not be carried on in the synagogue itself. More usual would be to move away from the synagogue into a private house, with the house group (Acts 18:7) serving as the church" (2004:434). The reality of this, was that the groups of Christians who met in House Churches were small in number. According to archaeological evidences, the houses could only hold 20-30 and at the most 40-50 people at a time. Considering this evidence, we deduce that Hebrews must have been

written from and to a House Church community in Rome, similar to the ones described in these historical books.

Origin made this comment, “who wrote the Epistle, God only knows the truth” and to this day the consensus about the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews remains unchanged, and for the purpose of our study, the author will remain anonymous.

Several suggestions have been made toward identifying possible authors, and they are plausible enough to, at the very least, include these characters as being connected to the Jewish Christians in Rome to whom Hebrews is “addressed”. Suggestions toward possible authorship are Apollos, Timothy (or an associate of Paul), Paul, Priscilla and Aquila and Barnabas. Donald Demeray extensively explored these possibilities and filled in the interesting facts supporting the theories toward authorship. For our purpose, these facts support and assist in identifying the characters who may have interacted with the recipients of Hebrews as stipulated in the table below:

<p>Apollos:</p> <p>Apollos was born of Jewish parents in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a devout person, “learned in the Scriptures”(Acts 18:24), however he only knew the teachings of John the Baptist. Apollos met two tentmakers Aquilla and Priscilla, who told him more about God. After their instruction he went to Achaia for two years and taught what they had told him. Later he became a leader in Corinth after Paul left. Here factions arose in the Church, one group claiming Paul as their leader, another claiming Apollos, still another Peter (Cephas), and still another Christ. This situation was a cause of Paul writing his First Epistle to the Corinthians, in which he told them to unite “in the same mind and judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). The last mention of Apollos is made in Titus 3:10</p>	<p>Barnabas:</p> <p>Barnabas living in Jerusalem at the time of the founding of the Church, was a Levite of Cyprus. He was one of the first converts to Christianity and a cousin to John Mark (Col 4:10). His real name was Joseph or Joses, but he was known as Barnabas by the Christians because it meant “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). We first hear of Barnabas when he sold one of his Cyprian fields and gave the money to the Christian community. He also supported Paul in his work, though later they separated (Acts 15:36-39). He is described as a “good man and full of the Holy Spirit.” He was kind, sympathetic, and understanding towards everyone he met. He is mentioned by name twenty-nine times in the New Testament. Tradition says he was the father of the orthodox church in Cyprus.</p>
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<p>Aquila:</p> <p>Aquila was a Jewish tentmaker who became influential in the Christian Church during its early days. After the Emperor Claudius ordered all Jews living in Rome to leave, Aquila and his wife, Priscilla went to Corinth (Acts 18:2-3). There they met another tentmaker, Paul of Tarsus, whose primary occupation was teaching the Gospel of Christ. They became friends and Aquila and his wife converted to Christianity before Paul left Corinth. They were known as zealous Christians (1 Corinth 16:19, Romans 16:3-4). They accompanied Paul to Ephesus, and later returned to Rome where their house was a meeting place for the young church (Romans 16:5). Afterwards, they returned again to Ephesus to continue Gospel work and that is the last known of them.</p>	<p>Priscilla:</p> <p>Priscilla or Prisca, was the wife of Aquila, a tentmaker, with whom she is always mentioned (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). When Paul was in Corinth he stayed with them, and they in turn travelled with him as far as Ephesus. Paul always spoke highly of her and the zealous work she was doing in advancing Christianity. Her homes in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome were the meeting places of the early churches in those cities. She and her husband helped in the theological training of Apollos. It has been suggested, though without proof, that she and her husband were the co-authors of the Epistle to the Hebrews.</p>
<p>Paul:</p> <p>Both Clement of Alexandria and Origen preserve the tradition that Paul is the author of Hebrews though they acknowledged the difficulties attached to the view. The Greek of Hebrews is more polished than Paul's and the consistent quality of the rhetoric quite remarkable. In the Western Church Pauline authorship was resisted until the latter half of the fourth century. Quite apart from the differences in vocabulary, Greek style and rhetoric, which cannot in themselves disprove Pauline authorship, but certainly makes a less plausible alternative, the absence of self-identifying salutation at the beginning of the document – Paul's normal practise – makes it hard to believe that Paul wrote it. Moreover numerous common Pauline themes are missing, and conversely the high priesthood of Christ, so central to Hebrews, does not figure largely in the acknowledged epistles of Paul. Above all, it is almost impossible to believe that Paul would identify himself as one of</p>	<p>Timothy/ (An Associate of Paul):</p> <p>Most of the other names proposed as the author of Hebrews are Paul's companions. This is due in part to a recognition of theological affinities between Hebrews and Paul's letters, and to the mention of Timothy in Heb 13:23. If Timothy is mentioned as associate, then the writer must have been connected to the Pauline circle. Early Christian missionaries such as Silas (Acts 15:40-18:5) and Epaphras (Phlm 23; Col 1:7; 4:12) were prominent and close enough to Paul, but the evidence is purely circumstantial.</p> <p>Most Likely:</p> <p>We do not know who wrote it; in all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, a second generation believer (Heb 2:3). Steeped in the LXX and judging by his excellent Greek vocabulary and style, enjoyed a good education.</p>

those who heard the gospel not from the Lord but from “those who heard Him” (Heb 2:3)	
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(Demeray 1972:190-191; O'Brien 2010:6; Carson, Moo and Morris 1992:394-396)

In summary, we can deduce that the characters involved in the plot of Hebrews are Jewish Christians recently returning to Rome after being expelled under Emperor Claudius. They were most likely also a House Church community of no more than 50 Christians. After many plausible suggestions toward authorship, we can conclude that although we do not know who wrote Hebrews, the leaders connected with this congregation were all rather prominent characters in the early church.

In addition to these deductions, South African theologian, Andrie du Toit wrote in his book *“Hebrews for Today”* (translated from Afrikaans) that the original audience were a group of Christians who needed encouragement after they were faced with difficult questions and opposition towards their faith in Christ. Instead of answering all their questions, he goes on to say, the author of Hebrews responded with a thorough proclamation of faith (2013:12).

Du Toit further draws a parallel between the Hebrew Christians and modern South Africans; Like the Hebrew Christians, South Africans have also felt disappointed by their churches or the faith they grew up with. They've been let down by a corrupt government and poor economy which leads to joblessness paired with unnecessary crime, violence and injustice. The uncertainty of the country's future, have led many South Africans to flee and they now live as expats in places like Dubai, Auckland, Wellington, Perth, Seattle or London. These people miss home, their country and their people, the comfort of cultural food, extraordinary places, like Paternoster, God's Window and a hardwood fire in the bush veld. Apart from longing for familiar comforts, expats in these countries are faced with options for pluralistic faith, or towards adopting completely different religions. These people are, like the Hebrew Christians, asking themselves, “Is being a Christian really worth it?” (2013:12-13)

Andrie du Toit concludes that Hebrews was written for Christians such as these, ordinary people who were doubting, struggling and unsure of their faith. Hebrews was written for people who in the face of constant change and uncertainty, were encouraged to persevere in their faith, because the One they believed in would never change (Hebrews 6) and would never leave or forsake them (Hebrews 13) (2013:12-13)

2.2.2 What is the plot or sequence?

The book of Hebrews develops through several sequences of affirming Christ's superiority and exhorting believers toward a continued faith and intimacy with Him. Hebrews' narrative structure thus follows a sequence of expositions and exhortations. For the purpose of our study, we are creating a narrative surrounding the natural sequence which necessitated the expositions and exhortations in Hebrews. Steven James in his article "Crafting Novels and Short Stories" explains how a story is driven forward by sequences of events:

Typically, your protagonist will have the harmony of both his external world and his internal world upset by the crisis that initiates the story... an interplay of these two dynamics will drive the story forward... It has to do with what the main character desires, and what he wishes to avoid (2011:76)

Our research thus far has provided the crisis which must have upset the Christians of Hebrews' external as well as internal world. Though not explicitly mentioned, we can ascertain from the pages of Hebrews that the "characters" of Hebrews' desire was to minimize the suffering and opposition they were facing as Christians, and as a result, considered apostatizing from their faith in order to avoid persecution.

Hebrews was written in response to these circumstances, and serves as the climax in encouraging the Hebrew Christians not to turn away from Christ. Steven James calls it "the discovery prompting change" at the height of a narrative:

At the climax of the story, the protagonist will make a discovery that will change their life... The protagonist's discovery must come from a choice that they make, not simply by chance of a Wise Answer Giver. While mentors might guide a character toward full self-discovery, the decisions and courage that determine the outcome of the story must come from the protagonist (2011:78).

The book of Hebrews serves as the “Wise Answer Giver”. Towards the end, in Chapter thirteen, the Hebrew Christian’s final exhortation toward making a decision for Christ is the promise in verse five and six “I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my Helper, I will not fear, what can man do to me?’” The book of Hebrews does not communicate how the recipients responded to the discovery, whether they were prompted to change or whether they moved forward in courage. For the purpose of our studies however, and according to the historical evidence of a persevering Christian community presiding in Rome in spite of severe persecutions, we will assume that at least some of the Hebrew Christians responded with courage and persevered in their faith after the expositions and exhortations of Hebrews encouraged and strengthened them.

2.2.3 What narrative time is covered?

The Historical grammatical evidence of the book of Hebrews, assists in identifying the specific time in history the book may have been written. As Milton explains in his book on biblical hermeneutics,

The special laws of grammar, agreeably to which the sacred writers employed language, were the result of their peculiar circumstances; and history alone throws us back into these circumstances. A new language was not made of the authors of Scripture; they conformed to the current language of the country and time. Their compositions would not have otherwise been intelligible (1999: 101).

In other words, Milton is saying that the literary style, themes applied, the manner in which sentences are constructed, and the chosen vocabulary, all identifies the specific time of history, and even the audience to whom it was addressed. For example, if we should be writing poetry to a group of children, we would not apply Old Edwardian English, since children would probably not understand it. Instead we would apply simple, modern English, so that the audience we are writing to might understand what we are communicating.

Similarly, Randolph Tate in his discussion of biblical interpretation emphasizes that the writers of the New Testament could not express themselves in any other way than applying the ideologies and practises of their times. New Testament writers borrowed terms and ideas from other religions or philosophies and traditions, and then reapplied or modified them, in order to make themselves heard and understood. “The reason for

this” Tate says, “is that such terms and concepts already carry with them a range of meanings that the reader can then adjust when the terms and concepts are placed in a new contextual setting” (1991:49). Gerald West further affirms the study of context and time of the biblical narrative; “Each of these historical-critical tools play a part in the possible dating and locating of the text within a particular historical period...the major concern is to reconstruct the type of society that produced the text” (1993:29).

In Hebrews’ case, we do not have the benefit of being certain of authorship, which would greatly assist in the critical analysis of the text, but Carson, Moo and Douglas assert, “in all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, a second generation believer (Hebrews 2:3), steeped in the LXX and judging by his excellent Greek vocabulary and style, enjoyed a good education” (1992:397). We can assume that there are similarities shared between the author and the audience, and that the author would employ a literary style relevant to those whom he addressed, while also identifying a specific time and place in history, from which we can draw a conclusion concerning the narrative time covered.

The author of Hebrews’ narrative addressed specific circumstances at a specific time. From the text it is evident that the author is constructing an exhortation to encourage Jewish Christians in danger of abandoning the New Covenant and reverting to the Old Covenant, in order to avoid persecution in Rome during a time after their expulsion when Christianity was outlawed but Judaism was not. David Pawson in “Unlocking the Bible” explains how, “Most of the arguments are taken from the Old Testament, which was the only Scripture they had, so these arguments would be readily accepted by the Jewish believers” (2015:1116).

Pawson further clarifies the uniqueness of the Hebrew Christians, by pointing out that they were both Jewish as well as shaped by their Greco-Roman world. The author of Hebrews engages both these cultural backgrounds in his literary style by applying them to time and history,

Hebrew thinking is horizontal time line thinking, between the past, the present and the future, whereas Greek thinking is more space-orientated – thinking a vertical line between heaven and earth. The Letter to the Hebrews combines these two outlooks. So we have the vertical line between the heavenly and the earthly, the invisible world and the visible world, and we have the horizontal time-line between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (2015:1118).

Pawson also makes the case that these Hebrew Christians were in danger of turning back from the New Covenant to the Old thus returning and retreating from the heavenly, to the earthly again.

According to the literary analysis of style, themes and language we have deduced that the narrative time covered in the book of Hebrews, is a response to a specific time in history. We concur with O'Brien who identifies a proposed time since it raises least resistance to the implicit and explicit evidences of the text, "the events of AD 49 (expulsion of Jews from Rome) could be referred to, and Hebrews written about AD 60-65, to a community that remembered – and suffered the consequences – of the events of AD49" (2010:17).

2.2.4 What is the author's point of view?

From the first chapter of Hebrews it would seem as though the author was merely narrating facts and scripture. With the opening of the second chapter however, the author starts with, "Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard..." and it becomes evident that the author of Hebrews writes out of a first person viewpoint. Completely immersed in and part of the narrative, personally involved and invested to such an extent that the author composes a homiletic, intending to instruct the Hebrew Christians in a, lecture-like didactic, encouraging and moralizing them towards faith in Christ. O'Brien affirms this,

The oral character of Hebrews as a homily, which recent scholarship has stressed, suggests that the author is skilfully conveying the impression that he is present with the assembly and actually delivering his sermon to them (2010:21).

Leon Morris in Gaebelien argues that, though there are homiletic tendencies, the book reads more like an epistle. From implicit evidence he asserts that the specific recipients to whom Hebrews is addressed are a group of close friends to the author. In fact, the author sees them as a group who ought to be teachers themselves (5:12), the author knows them personally and looks forward to visiting them while asking them to pray for him because (13:19,23) he has a good opinion of them (6:9). The author even recalls the days of persecution and suffering this group of friends had to endure (10:32. 12:4). In Morris' opinion "the book is addressed to a specific group, so it may

be called a letter”. However, Morris admits that it lacks the elements of a usual epistolary framework (1981:3).

For most of church history, Hebrews was classified as a letter or an epistle, but as Carson, Moo and Morris agree, “Epistle” or “Letter”, in the “New Testament period at least, was an extremely broad category” and further suggests, “the work was originally a homily or series of homilies that have been turned into a letter” (1992:391).

O’Brien resolves the matter making reference to the ancient practices of letter writing and speech making;

Ancient theorists assumed that letter writing and speech making were two different types of activities and analysed them as such. Letters were sent to those who were absent, while speeches were given at assemblies where people were present. But letters could be read aloud at assemblies and speeches sent in written form (2010:22).

The conclusion of O’Brien’s argument is that “there would have been no reason why Hebrews can’t be understood from both an oral and written perspective” (2010:22). In this regard, we agree with O’Brien, that Hebrews was most likely written down, delivered in its whole unfolding as a sermon to the community and then further studied and read over time by the Hebrew Christians.

2.3 Semiotic Analysis

2.3.1 What deeper patterns of meaning are conveyed by the words and symbols?

The book of Hebrews’ avid proclamation is this: Jesus Christ has come as the fulfilment of all the signs, wonders and Old Testament prophecies. The Sacrificial System, Temple, the Law and the Priesthood were all shadows; the substance of those shadows were found in Christ. For the Hebrew Christians who were considering to apostatize and return to Judaism, hearing the proclamation of Hebrews would make such an action unthinkable. Who would return and have a relationship with a shadow, if you could have a relationship with the One casting that shadow? Pawson points out, “When we read the Old Testament there is a sense in which we are reading about the shadows of Jesus” (2015:1126). He further clarifies that the book of Hebrews especially focusses on three of these shadows, namely The Priesthood, The Covenant

and The Sacrifice. We will now look at how the book of Hebrews expounds upon each of these.

a) The Priesthood

A Priest's main role was to act as mediator between a holy God and sinful man. Priests made mediation and intercession through offering sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people of God in order to bring reconciliation. In Hebrews 3:1-6 Jesus is identified as High Priest, a mediator deserving of more glory than Moses since He is also the Son of God and the builder of God's house. Hebrews 4:14 further elevates the position of Christ "who as our high priest, passed through the heavens" in order to mediate and intercede on our behalf. Cardinal Vanhoye made an extensive study of the priesthood of Christ in his book "Old Testament Priests, New Testament Priest" and concludes the following:

He (the author of Hebrews) has laid the foundation for the authority of his priestly word to which we must respond with an unreserved allegiance, "holding firm the profession of faith". The Perspective is extremely clear: Christ is being presented as "high priest worthy of trust" (2009:99)

Christ's authority is being established as greater than the priesthood of the book of Leviticus, since his position in the household of God, even surpasses that of Moses, and therefore can be trusted.

Apart from the fact that Christ's Priesthood carries more weight in authority, Jesus is also a high priest who is able to "sympathize with our weakness, since He was tempted in every way" but different from earthly priests in that he, "remained without sin" even after being tempted (Hebrews 4:16). The author of Hebrews further presents the priesthood of Christ as one to which Jesus did not elevate himself, but as the Old Testament Priests were, called to this position (5:4). In this regard Cardinal Vanhoye comments, "The priesthood is a gift of God which puts the priest at service to his brothers, every high priest is established on behalf of mankind to represent them before God" (2009:120).

The Hebrew author takes it one step further and identifies the shadow which acts as representative of Christ's priestly order preceding that of the Levitical Priesthood, "being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (5:10). Who

was both a King and a priest before the Most-High God. John Owen in “The Priesthood of Christ” interprets that “by virtue of his call, Melchizedek in Genesis 22 purified Abraham and his company after a great slaughter so as to prepare them for sacred service before God” (2010:37). In the same way, Jesus in His Priestly King role, purifies us and makes us ready for sacred relationship and service in the presence of God.

Cardinal Vanhoye however, points out the fact that Jesus, being from the tribe of Judah and not of the priestly tribe mentioned by Moses, prepares the hearers to receive a new kind of priesthood;

Having established the basis, we are led to the discernment of what is unexpected and unsurpassable in the priesthood of Christ, a Priest of a new kind (chapter 7), Christ has accomplished a decisive sacerdotal (ministerial) action (chapter 9), whose efficacy has completely transformed the situation of human beings (chapter 10) (2009:66).

With regard to Hebrews, the message of the Priesthood of Christ is made clear. What the shadow of the Old Testament priesthood could not accomplish, Christ attained and perfected. Every believer in Christ now enjoys an intimate relationship with God, as Jesus remains their constant and eternal High Priest, interceding and mediating on their behalf.

b) The Covenant

In Hebrews chapter eight, the author quotes Jeremiah 33:31-34; at the heart of this chapter he says in verse 6 “As it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old covenant, as the covenant He mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises”.

Both the old and the new covenants were obtained from God. When the LORD gave Moses the laws and instructions for building the tabernacle (Exodus 35-40), the detail was impeccable, everything down to the millimetre, was exactly prescribed.

In Hebrews the reason becomes clear. The writer tells us that God was extremely specific, because the earthly tabernacle was a copy of the heavenly one. The priests

serving in the earthly tabernacle, served the Law of Moses, while Christ serves in the heavenly tabernacle. Hebrews 8:5 “They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, God instructed him, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain.” Everything done under the Old Covenant, was found upon the ultimate provision and fulfilment in Christ. According to verse 2, Jesus serves as a minister in heavenly places, in the “true tent” set up by God and not by man.

Though the Old Covenant was undoubtedly also set up by God, it was not faultless. The fault God found with the Old Covenant was with the people. Humanity is incapable of keeping their promises to God and remaining faithful. If our salvation depended on humanity’s faithfulness, it would still be lost. God fulfilled His own promises, because He knows we are incapable.

The New Covenant, is based upon better promises, since it is avowed by God saying “I WILL”; I WILL put my laws in their minds and write it on their hearts, I WILL be their God, I WILL forgive their wickedness, I WILL remember their sins no more. Pawson comments on Hebrews’ comparison of the two covenants, “There is also the shadow of God’s covenantal relationship with His people through Christ. The writer asks why they were considering to go back to the Old Covenant, now that they were in the new”. He goes on to state the benefit of the New Covenant being based not only on God’s forgiveness but also His “forget-ness”; Pawson remarks, “I think the most amazing miracle is that when God forgives, He also forgets” (2015:1127).

In Hebrews chapter nine, we further learn the benefit of the better promise under the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, priests had to perform sacrifices on a yearly basis, thus reminding the people that the sacrifices made under the Old Covenant were insufficient to attain atonement for guilt and sin. Christ as mediator of the New Covenant offered Himself, sinless and once for all (Hebrews 10), making perfect atonement for sin, which was even sufficient in clearing guilty consciences.

The notion to turn away from Christ, in light of the New Covenant our relationship is based upon, becomes even more absurd. It would mean rejecting the peace we’ve obtained through the sacrifice of Christ, and returning to trying to make peace with

God through offering unworthy sacrifices based on an Old Covenant which was not made to last, but to fade away as soon as Christ was revealed as the fulfilment of it; (Hebrews 8:13 “In speaking of a new covenant, He makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”)

During our studies, it became clear how the church also became guilty of moving back into a type of Old Covenant relationship with God. Not depending on Christ, but upon their own abilities to maintain and keep the Law in order to not only govern the church, but nations. Stuart Murray in his book on Post-Christendom affirms how it escalated in history; “Constantine hoped Christianity would provide the glue to hold together this Empire: instead it provided the framework and interpretive story on which medieval Europe would eventually be constructed” (2004:49).

While the world became more “Christian” there was a great price to be paid in not basing faith upon the New Covenant promises fulfilled in Jesus. Murray further identifies the cost of a Christian Empire, which had its origins during Constantine’s time and continued until the Enlightenment by maintaining, “the main price for the Christendom shift was the marginalisation of Jesus: for the church to come in from the margins to the centre, it had to push Jesus from the centre to the margins of Christianity” (2004:108).

In view of this, the message of Hebrews has never been more relevant in guarding Christians not to turn away from Christ, as the basis of their faith does not depend on human faithfulness, but rests upon the Covenant Promises made and fulfilled by God through Jesus. As Murray resolved, “Our greatest resource in Post-Christendom is Jesus, our priority must be to rediscover how to tell the story of Jesus and present His life, teaching, death and resurrection” (2004:316).

c) The Sacrifice

After identifying Jesus as High Priest and Mediator of a New Covenant, Hebrews 9:22 communicates the base necessity of a sacrifice “without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sins”. Cardinal Vanhoye in commentary on this verse states informatively;

This verse shows the depth this purification would have to penetrate. As a sinner man needed a complete remodelling of his being, which could only come about through death. It was also necessary for this death to establish a new relationship between mankind and God as well as solidarity. It is exactly this which was accomplished in the death of Christ who was transformed into a self oblation to God for the salvation of mankind (2009:204).

In order to secure all sinners' salvation, Jesus became the sacrifice as well as the sacrifice-Maker. Hebrews now further compares the difference between the atonement attained through the sacrifice of Jesus, and that done under the Law.

Firstly, Jesus did not enter into a holy place made with human hands, but into the very presence of God on our behalf (9:24). Secondly He did not enter into God's presence to offer Himself repeatedly as the High Priest needed to with blood that was not his own, once a year – but Jesus had done away with sin once and for all by offering Himself (9:25-28). Thirdly Jesus offered His own blood which was sufficient for the purification of sins, and therefore only offered once, while cleansing even the guilty conscience of the sinner, whereas it was impossible for the offering of the blood of goats and bulls to sanctify the sinner and only served as a once a reminder of their sins once a year when they were offered (9:11-13; 10:1-4).

Lastly, Christ's sacrifice was an act of His will to fulfil the will of His Father. Psalm 40:6-8 is quoted in Hebrews 10:5-7 – He willingly came to lay down His own life as a sacrifice for many, and after He had offered Himself He sat down at the right hand of His Father.

Not in the least, the Holy Spirit testifies to the sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice when Jeremiah 31:33-34 is fulfilled and the Spirit writes the laws on every believer's heart and mind, and God no longer remembers their sins (Hebrews 10:15-17). Now, there is no longer any need for another offering (10:18).

The benefit of Christ's sacrifice is intimacy with God. Every believer can now draw near to God, through the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, entering into the holy of holies through the curtain which is the flesh and the blood of Christ sanctifying us from our sins, as Christ remains seated in the presence of God, interceding on our behalf as our Great High Priest forever (10:19-23). Pawson relates that the Hebrew

author, “impresses upon his audience the inferiority to return to Judaism, with its repetitive sacrifices and its inferior covenant – in doing so they would be rejecting the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus” (2015:1128).

CHAPTER 3

Exegeting Relevant Passages Pertaining Toward the Encouragement of the Christian Faith

In this chapter we will exegete relevant texts related to our studies. Our first task will be to gain a collective understanding on the background of the book of Hebrews and how its themes pertain to encouraging faith. Gorman elaborates on the purpose of Biblical exegesis as follows,

A more modest and appropriate primary goal would be to achieve a credible and coherent understanding of the text on its own terms and in its own context. This primary objective is often, though not always, pursued with a larger (and ultimately more important) existential goal – that somehow the text in its context may speak to us in our different – yet-similar context. (2009:10)

We have already explored the context of the world and circumstances the Hebrew Christians found themselves in. In addition, we will explore the themes which encouraged these Christians toward faith in their context. The objective, as Gorman states, is existential, allowing the text to speak its encouragement toward faith from its historic context into our current, different, yet similar context. Themes to be explored are those which are relevant to affirmation of faith in Christ and persevering in it: Christ's Superiority, Superiority of Faith, Maturing in Faith, Examples of Faith Heroes and Endurance.

Our general approach to the text is canonical, "namely, a focusing on the communicative intention of the text itself" (Noble 1995:177). While also employing a Synchronic approach in analysing the relevant texts.

Gorman explains that a synchronic approach – which means "same time" or to "synchronize" – explores the most effective mode of communication for a specific people in their context; "it may be defined as an approach that integrates the ways people use language with the ways they live in the world" (2009:13). For example, language, traditions, philosophies and imagery which are relevant to the readers can be employed by the author to assist in communicating with their audience. In the case of Hebrews, the author extensively makes use of the Old Testament sacrificial system and imagery to communicate its fulfilment in Christ and the importance of not neglecting faith in Christ.

For the purpose of our studies therefore, we will be making a study of the text in its historical context and the manner it was communicated, as well as the circumstances which initiated the text, to order an existential outcome. We do not merely want to look at the text as a historical or textual artefact, but as Gorman says, we want to encourage readers to “engage with the text experientially, it could or should affect their lives” (2009:18). With this in mind, we shall select a few texts in the book of Hebrews for exegesis which specifically encourage faith and endurance in Christ.

3. Exegete selected relevant texts in Hebrews pertaining to;

3.1 Christ’s Superiority

Relevant texts to be explored from the book of Hebrews, which specifically engages Christ’s superiority in order to strengthen the Hebrew Christian’s faith;

3.1.1 Hebrews 1:1-4;

3.1.2 Hebrews 1:5-14;

3.1.3 Hebrews 3:1-6;

3.1.4 Hebrews 4:14-5:10;

3.1.5 Hebrews 7

3.1.1 Hebrews 1:1-4 (NIVUK)

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

We have already established that the crux and essence of Hebrews is Jesus Christ. From the start this is apparent as the opening verses explicitly proclaims Christ to anyone paying attention. The author is not concerned with greeting his listeners. He has one purpose in mind, and that is to bring Christ into focus. As James Thompson points out, the Greek of the author is excellent, and instead of the traditional epistolary opening, the author starts with an ancient technique called the “*periodos*”: “It begins

with a carefully structured combination of clauses in 1:1-4 (one sentence in Greek) that ancient writers called a period (*periodos*), literally a “way around” (*peri+hodos*), that organizes several clauses into a well-rounded unity” (2008:31). FF Bruce specifies how this one sentence makes seven Christological statements which form the basis and upon which the rest of the book will build (1990:45); that serves to confirm Jesus Christ as the climax and fulfilment of everything spoken in the past. It is further supported by Donald Hagner who points out that the first statement in Hebrews sets the doctrine of Christ for the entire book: “The introductory Christological prologue in these verses is thus similar to the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18) in its function as well as its Christocentric theology” (1990:17).

It is also clear from the opening verses, that the author does not have to introduce the god he is talking about, but that his readers have a preconceived idea of who God is and that He has spoken to them in definitive ways in the past. Barnabas Lindars establishes that the author of Hebrews starts with God; “and his first point is that God has spoken. There is no definition of God. No philosophical or speculative ideas about God are introduced. The Jewish understanding of God is one of the things that is taken for granted” (1991:29).

We can safely conclude that the opening verses of Hebrews establishes everything that is about to be expounded upon in the book against the backdrop of Israel’s history and how it no longer only affects one nation but includes all of reality, as Thompson explains: “With the claim that the Son is at God’s right hand, the author consistently demonstrates that Christian experience is the culmination of Israel’s experience in time and sets out it’s ontological superiority” (2008:23).

In order to gain an understanding of what Christ’s superiority in His status, work and Person means for our studies, we will expound shortly upon the seven statements of fact made in the first four verses of Hebrews proclaiming Christ’s superiority as identified by several commentators, FF Bruce (1990:46-49); also supported by Hagner (1990:22-26); Guthrie (1998:47-50) and Morris in Gaebelien (1981:13-15).

In the end, it becomes clear how Christ as the fulfilment of all the ages, was not only relevant for the Jewish Christians of Hebrews, but still maintains its authority, since we

are still living in the Messianic Age, brought in through the finished work of Christ on the cross. He still remains seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, and all things will still be subjected under His feet when time has reached its fulfilment.

Christ's superiority is established from the start as Hebrews 1:1-2 identifies Jesus as God's ultimate and final revelation. In Joe Tolin's expository sermons on the book of Hebrews (n.d:255), he points out that the progressive revelation of God was spoken fully and finally in His Son and nothing remains to be revealed beyond Him; "that is in fact why the author uses the word "eschaton" in verse 2 – the revelation is complete". This serves as an adequate introduction and enhances the effect of the seven Christological statements that follow.

a) God has appointed Him heir of all things (1:2 referencing Ps 2:8);

At the beginning of these seven statements, the author alludes to Psalm 2. Guthrie points out: "If this Psalm indeed lies behind the author's thought, the inheritance of "all things" expand to the idea to include the whole of the created order...the initial proposition both affirms and anticipates the present and future rule of Christ" (1998:47). Hagner takes a different approach, while also referring to the reality that the author alludes to Psalm 2:7; he adds the cultural significance of what it means to be a son in Jewish culture, especially the first born son: "In Hebrew culture, to be a son means to be an heir, therefore the Son of God by virtue of His Son-ship, is appointed as the One who will finally possess everything" (1990: 23). Instead of exalting Christ it may seem at first glance as though Christ is in a lower position, needing to earn His inheritance, but Morris in Gaebelien corrects such a misconception by alluding to "heir of all things" as being a title of dignity and honour; "it shows Christ has the supreme place in all the mighty universe, His exaltation to the highest place did not mark some new dignity, but His re-entry to His rightful place" (1981:13).

By virtue of the first statement we can conclude that the author has in mind the Messianic psalm Psalm 2. Thereby, the author is implying that Christ is the awaited ruler, who as the Son and heir, is the only One with the right to rule and His rule extends through all ages and over all created things. This includes, this current age and the age to come.

b) *It is through Him God has made the universe (1:2);*

Apart from being rightful ruler who inherits all things through all the ages, the second fact stated about Christ is that God had created the universe through Him. Morris, in Gaebelien, refers to the Greek word (*di'*), which means "through" and says that it; "preserves the important truth about God as Creator" (1981:13). The thought is developed not only here in Hebrews, but both Morris in Gaebelien and Bruce affirm other places in New Testament scripture where the truth is affirmed in John 1:3 "*all things were created through Him*" and Col 1:16 "*all things were created through Him and for Him*". Instead of using the term "all things" here in Hebrews, the author specifies what is meant and uses the word *aiōnes* translated as "universe", which Bruce says literally means "ages", but he further denotes; "what is meant is not merely the "ages" but the whole created universe of space and time, and the affirmation that God brought this universe into being by the agent of His Son" (Bruce 1990:47). Guthrie explains what is meant by referring to Christ as the "agent" of creation by saying that both the Father as Creator and the Son as His agent were active in the work of creating, though their roles were different; "the Son as the Father's agent is the One to whom all of creation will be subjected in the end and He is the One through whom it originated in the beginning" (1998: 47).

c) *He is the reflection of God's glory (1:3);*

The imagery that comes to mind here are the rays from the sun, who shoots forth from the source millions of kilometres from the earth, but reaches the earth with all the goodness and benefit of the powerful life-giving source. Both are in essence the same, but have distinctive roles, as rays go out from the sun, so the Son goes out from the Father to accomplish His good purposes on earth. Hagner affirms this in his translation of the word *apaugasma*: "radiance" or "radiant light" which means "intense brightness", he further alludes to the similarities between Hebrews and other New Testament writers: "Other New Testament authors hold a similar view of Christ, in John's gospel, Christ is designated as "*the light who brings light to all men*" (John 1:9), and "*we have seen His glory*" (John 1:14) – for John, as for our author, Jesus expresses the brilliant glory of God "(1990:23-24). He continues by adding that Paul also speaks of the light that Christ brought, referring to "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4; 4:6). Though these Christians were Jewish, they

were also Hellenistic Jews living in Rome, and Bruce affirms that the author of Hebrews had a touch of the Greek philosopher Philo's thoughts who, "similarly uses the source of light to refer to the Logos in relation to God... for the Logos or Wisdom is the personification of a divine attribute" (1990:48).

This implies that the author is saying, "to know Jesus is also to know the Father". Jesus in John 14, said something similar to Philip who asked Him, "Lord show us the Father" (John 14:8), to which Jesus responded; "whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

d) He is the very image of the essence of God (1:3);

The train of thought directly links with the previous statement identifying Christ as the radiance of God's glory, since He is the manner in which we experience the benefit of our holy God and all His attributes. Saying Christ captures the very image of the essence of God, almost sounds like an artist interpreting a portrait of a person capturing their very essence, personality or character. This example takes form as we read the definition of Morris in Gabelein for his word study on the NIV's translation of this same verse, "The exact representation of His being" and he says: "Exact representation" translates *character*, an unusual word used only here in the New Testament, originally denoted an instrument for engraving and then used to mark through stamping on an object in a literal sense it was used of the impression on coins" (1981:14). If a coin bears the stamped marker, it authenticated its origin. In the same manner, the author is conveying that Christ bears the authenticating stamp affirming His origin from the Father, while simultaneously bearing the very image of God. This means that we can once again allude to John 14:8, where Jesus responds to Philip, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father", since Jesus bears His image and essence.

e) He upholds all things by His enabling word (1:3);

Christ's work as the Agent of the Creator is further developed by the author of Hebrews when he states that Jesus "upholds all things", to which Morris in Gaebelein clarifies; "the word used for "sustaining" or "upholding" translated from *pherōn* means "to carry along", the concept being dynamic not static, demonstrates a movement forward" (1981:14). It does not picture Christ, "holding the whole world in His hands" as the

children's song proclaims, but rather pictures Christ moving the accumulation of the entire universe (ages past and to come) as He actively participates in fulfilling the purposes of God. Guthrie reports a similar notion: "The action speaks of a continual organization and carrying forward the created order to a designed end, an activity ascribed to God in Jewish writings" (1998:48). The author therefore is conveying that Christ as God, has and still is actively involved in fulfilling the redemption plan of God for all creation, carrying it forward towards its glorious end. Like an athlete, our forerunner is Jesus, going before us and making the way towards the finish line (Hebrews 12:1-3).

f) He has made purification for sins (1:4);

For the author of Hebrews, this statement rises above the rest as it is a central theme in the book itself. As a culmination of everything Christ possesses He essentially provides the atonement necessary for a restored relationship between sinful humanity and their holy God. Guthrie refers to Christ's fulfilment of the Old Testament offerings, the Day of Atonement and the blood covenant, as he states; "What the Son had provided was a forgiveness that would be permanent and lead into the very presence of God" (1998:49). Morris in Gaebelien reports how for the author of Hebrews "sin" is a great problem; "the word "*hamartia* ("sin") appears twenty-five times in this epistle, a total only exceeded by Romans with forty-eight, sin appears as the power that deceives men and leads them to destruction" (1981:15). The author of Hebrews is clearly stating that the only manner to become ceremonially clean from sin and be set free from its powers of destruction and deception, is by purification (*katharismos*), which Morris says is a word used for ritual cleansing in the New Testament (1981:15) – which Christ have provided. The finality of Christ's work is demonstrated in the next statement, since after Christ had made purification for sin, He sat down, implying that He was finished, the work was finished and nothing else needed to be done.

g) He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven (1:4)

The author of Hebrews later in his book alludes to the fact that the priests work in the temple was never finished. Year after year they had to make atonement through sacrificing sacred animals in order to make atonement, first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people (Hebrews 10:24-26). The image coming to mind is that the priests were always standing in order to be ready to perform their rituals and sacrifices,

day after day, year after year. Morris in Gaebelien illustrates the change Christ brought through His sacrifice; “when His work of purification was ended, He sat down, sitting is the posture of rest, and the right hand a place of honour” (1981:15). The author is conveying that Christ not only provided purification for sins, He was also exalted. Guthrie reports how the phrase used by the author would be familiar as it alluded to the manner in which they commonly addressed God: “‘Majesty’ constitutes a reverential periphrasis for “God” commonly used in Jewish circles of the day and ‘in heaven’ is God’s locale and particularly privileged position” (1998:49). Hagner points out how this one statement brings about a finality and climatic clause conveying a sense of the completion and fulfilment of God’s purpose (1990:25). In modern terms, this would be an excellent part to roll the credits indicating the epic conclusion to the end of a story, as Christ is pictured seated in a place of honour after completing His priestly duties, once and for all.

To summarise the first periscope it is safe to say that the author of Hebrews opens this exhortation with a clear view of Jesus and His place and status in the Kingdom of God. It resembles the scene from the book of Revelation where Christ at the beginning and the end of the book proclaims of Himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Rev 1:8 and Rev 22:13). Elwell and Yarbrough indicates one of the main aims of the Book of Hebrews is already addressed in these opening verses;

It is to remind the readers of the greatness of Jesus Christ. Old Testament prophets, angels, Moses and Aaron serve the grand purposes of God’s redemptive plan but none of them can compare with the Son, who “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word” (2013:332)

3.1.2 Hebrews 1:5-14 (NIVUK)

⁵ *For to which of the angels did God ever say,
‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father’?
Or again, ‘I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’?*

⁶ *And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,
‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’*

⁷ *In speaking of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire.’*

⁸ *But about the Son he says,*

*'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.
9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy.'*

10 He also says,

*'In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

*11 They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.*

*12 You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.*

*But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.'*

*13 To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make
your enemies a footstool for your feet?'*

*14 Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit
salvation?'*

The Hebrews writer now further expounds on the opening statement in verse one: God had spoken in the past in many ways and through different agents, and after establishing Christ as the final and superior agent through whom God not only speaks but also accomplishes His purposes, the author now identifies and addresses Christ's superiority over the past agents. In verses 5-14, the identified past agents in mind are the angels. It may seem absurd to modern thinkers to devote so much of one's argument on Christ's superiority over heavenly beings such as angels, since it is not really part of our culture or manner of thinking. It was however so for the recipients in the ancient world to whom this letter originally was addressed, as Hagner clarifies: "So important was the idea of angels in the first century that one encounters it in both Greek and Jewish thinking" (1990:30). He further elaborates how angels were encountered in both cultures:

In Greek Gnosticism, angels acted as mediators between God and humanity through emanations in the form of a host of spiritual beings who have no material bodies... Within Jewish thought, God was perceived as remote in His transcendence and the need for angelic beings was felt (1990:30).

According to Hagner, in both traditions, angels were considered the highest beings of authority. According to Gnosticism, Christ would have been regarded as lower than the heavenly beings, since He was incarnate in a real physical body, and in Gnosticism

the spirit and the flesh would never unite. Vine’s expository dictionary affirms that angels were considered mediating agents, since the word from which they derive their name *angelos* means “messenger”; “they were created by God and belonged to heaven (Rev 1:20; Matt 18:10; Acts 12:15; Heb 2:5; Ps 8:5), considered as guardians and representatives who are engaged in the service of God (Ps 103:20)” (Vine, Unger and White 1985:26).

Since angelic beings were held in such high regard, it was necessary for the author to establish Christ’s superiority over them as mediating agent. The author does so by quoting several Messianic Psalms. The rhetoric employed by the author in a sequence of “chain quotations” as Guthrie identifies, answering each of the seven Christological statements from the opening verses, with a quote from the Old Testament to offer defence of what is being taught (1998:67). These seven quotations are also supported by Morris in Gaebelin, Bruce who identifies the source of the seven quotations; “five are taken from the Psalter, one is taken from the Torah and one is taken from the Former Prophets” (1990:53). Thompson gives these seven statements supported by and reflected in seven quotes in a visual comparison by placing them next to each other in table form (2008:52). The table below represents Thomson’s approach and has been extremely helpful towards gathering an understanding insight and information for biblical exegesis:

Hebrews 1:1-4	Hebrews 1:5-13
<i>God has appointed Him heir of all things (1:2b)</i>	<i>“You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (Heb 1: 5a; quoting Ps 2:7) and; “I will be to Him a Father and He shall be My Son” (Heb 1:5b; quoting 2 Sam 7:14)</i>
<i>Through whom He made the universe (1:2c)</i>	<i>“You Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of Your hands” (Heb 1:10; quoting Ps 102:25-27)</i>
<i>He is the reflection of God’s glory (1:3 a);</i>	<i>“Let all God’s angels worship Him” (Heb 1:6; quoting Dt 32:43) and;</i>
<i>He is the very image of the essence of God (1:3 b);</i>	<i>“They will perish, but you will remain, they will wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed, but you will remain the same and your years will have no end” (Hebrews 1:11-12; quoting Ps 102:25-27)</i>

<i>He upholds all things by His enabling word (1:3c)</i>	<i>“Your throne o God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of Your uprightness is the sceptre of Your Kingdom” (Hebrews 1:8; quoting Ps 45:6)</i>
<i>He has made purification for sins (1:4a)</i>	<i>“You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions” (Heb 1:9 quoting Ps 45:7)</i>
<i>He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven (1:4)</i>	<i>“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Heb 1:13 quoting Ps 110:1)</i>

We will not exegete these Old Testament texts in detail. We will, however, reach a conclusion of why these texts were important, and what relevance they hold for the purpose of our studies.

The author of Hebrews’ purpose in writing his homily is Christological, aiming to affirm Christ’s superiority and centrality so that the Hebrew Christians would not shipwreck their faith in face of the persecution they were suffering. The author’s proclamations left no other agent or mediator greater than Christ, not even the angels, in whom they should put their faith for salvation. Closing chapter 1 in verse 14, the author says, *“Are they (the angels) not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”* (ESV). Thompson alludes that this rhetorical question not only indicates that the Son’s relationship to the Father is greater than the angels, but that this struggling community of Christians had a place of honour in God’s redemptive kingdom; *“thus the author reassures the community of its place in God’s plan, indicating that their relationship to the exalted Son places them above the angels, who exist to serve them who were about to inherit salvation”* (2008:56). For a community who saw the angels as the highest authority in mediating between God and man, it must have been ground breaking to hear that they were considered in higher regard in God’s kingdom because of their relationship to Christ.

For the purpose of our studies, this proclamation is significant since we live in a time when people design their own brand of religion by weaving together beliefs from different sources all over the world. As Guthrie claims; *“the church, and Western culture in general, are in the midst of an authority crisis, some turn to New Age or a*

mix of Eastern Religions, while others turn to science to solve the mysteries of the universe” (1998:77). Bruce Demarest is the general editor of a book called, “Christian Spirituality”. In their research they affirm how people are searching for deeper meaning in their spiritual lives and therefore turning to other spiritual authorities in order to satiate this hunger; “The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported in 2009 that elements of Eastern Faith and New Age thinking have been widely accepted by 65 percent of U.S adults, including many Christians” (2012:14). The purpose of Hebrews has never been more relevant. God never changes, and He has established the only authority worthy to subject to. Moreover, Christ has and always will be exalted above any and all other authorities, and our relationship through Christ makes no other mediator between God and man necessary.

3.1.3 Hebrews 3:1-6 (NIVUK)

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵ ‘Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house,’ bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

The author shifts focus from the fact that God spoke through the angels in the opening of the book, to the Old Testament, specifically Moses and the establishment of the Law. Hagner makes it apparent that what the author is about to share would not have been easy to hear for a Jewish listener who held Moses and the law in high esteem; “the author now turns to the superiority of Jesus to Moses, and by implication His superiority to the law, for Jewish readers both Moses and the law are of central importance and the author of Hebrews’ argument is astonishingly bold” (1990:59). Guthrie supports this sentiment in stating, “evidence suggest that Moses held an even higher status than the angels because of his special intimacy with God and his pre-eminence as messenger of the Old Covenant” (1998:127). It becomes increasingly apparent that the author of Hebrews made profound statements to challenge the Hebrew Christians’ faith in Christ, as it meant a complete adjustment in the focus of their beliefs.

3:1 – In the opening of chapter three and verse one, the author calls the Hebrew Christians “holy brothers and sisters” to which O’Brien attests; “they have been made holy by the sanctifying work of Christ, and have therefore become sharers and citizens set apart from this world to become members of a new family, God’s family” (2010:128). Because of this new reality, the author calls the audience to “fix your thoughts on Jesus”, Thompson alludes to the verb the author uses for “fix” *katanoein* which means “to look at in a reflective manner” or “to contemplate”, and the object of their contemplation is identified as Jesus. Not only does the author call them to contemplate Jesus, but to specifically acknowledge Him as apostle and high priest. Vine’s expository dictionary translates the word for “apostle” as *apostolos*, which means “to be sent forth” (1985:30) and Hagner further suggests that this is the only place in the NT where Jesus is called an apostle; “Jesus is indeed both apostle and high priest, Jesus *the one sent* by God to present Him to humanity, is also high priest representing humanity to God” (1990:59). In this opening statement of chapter three alone, the author calls to the attention of the Hebrews that they are in a new position as holy sons and daughters. He also proclaims Christ, who accomplished this new reality by His work as their apostle and priest, and in view of this the author calls them to contemplate Jesus as they fix their thoughts on what He has accomplished on their behalf.

3:2 – The author now employs a new dimension to the community’s confession, as he adapts Numbers 12:7 claiming that Jesus was “faithful to the one that appointed Him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house”. A claim that is not meant to offend Jewish listeners, as Thompson states; “just as the author’s task in chapter 1 and 2 was not to engage in polemic against angels, here his task is not to denigrate Moses but to introduce one who is faithful as a point of comparison to the Son” (2008:89). The author’s purpose thus, is one of comparison and not anti-Semitic. He is not trying to degrade the Old Testament, but instead attempting to show how Jesus is a fulfillment of it. The author further clarifies what is meant by the “house” in which Moses was faithful to serve, to which Bruce states: “The house of Numbers 12:7 in which Moses was faithful to serve was not the tent of meeting but the people of Israel, the family of God” (1990:92). This implies that Jesus as apostle and high priest in comparison to Moses was a faithful servant not to a place or institution, but to the people/family of

God. From this scripture, it becomes clear that God had already begun a work of making a people for Himself. It began with Moses and was brought to fruition in Jesus.

3:3-4 Developing the thought that God has been building His house, starting with Moses and ending with Christ, the author now plainly states that Jesus deserves higher honour than Moses, once again, not a statement made to defame Moses, but rather one to put into perspective the fulfilment of the plan of God. As this is a sensitive matter, which could easily be misinterpreted as being opposed to the Old Covenant, the author employs a simple illustration of a house being built, something the readers could easily grasp. Hagner states plainly, “The author in effect associates Jesus with the builder, whereas Moses remains associated with the house” (1990:60). A more rounded explanation is given by Bruce on the position of Moses in comparison to Jesus in the household of God: “Moses was a household servant, exalted by virtue of his outstanding faithfulness to the owner and builder of the house, God, but Christ is the Son of God and together with the Father is founder and inheritor of the household” (1990:92). Moses thus served faithfully in God’s household, fulfilling his duties as God required of him, duties which pointed toward the promise of the Son who would ultimately bring the household into its final state. For those listening, and for us today, we can conclude that Christ did not bring in a new plan, but fulfilled the plan God had started to put in motion since before Moses’ time.

3:5-6 The train of thought reaches its completion as the author continues to explain the different roles between Moses as a servant of the household and Christ as the Son; “Moses was faithful “as a servant” (*ōs therapon*) whereas Christ was faithful “as a son” (*ōs huios*), the purpose of Moses’ role “as part of the household” was to point to the later revelation, anticipating God’s revelation in the Son “who is over the household” (Guthrie 1998: 129). There is no turning back, for those Jewish Christians who were considering a return to Judaism, this would have been definitive, since it identifies Jesus as the head of the household God began to build where Moses was a servant. Those who believe in Christ have become part of the household of God, a reality Thompson explains would have changed the community’s symbolic world with a bold affirmation “we are His household” (2008:91). The claim of being part of God’s household is conditional however, as we see in verse 6, “*if we hold firm to the confidence and hope in which we glory*”: “Membership in God’s household is not to be

taken for granted, faithfulness is required not only of God's special servants (Moses) and His Son, but of His people as well" (Hagner 1990:61). The author presents his listeners with the first of many exhortations to remain steadfast in their faith. The community of Christians are a family, in the household of God and in order to remain so they must follow Moses' example as faithful servant, under Christ's authority who is the head of the house. No wonder – as Thompson points out – that the author uses the word *katechein* "to hold firm" regularly, since it is synonymous with being patient, enduring and being faithful (2008:92). The Hebrew Christians are constantly being reminded of the patient and faithful enduring faith of those who went before them.

3.1.4 Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10 (NIVUK)

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ 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.

Leading up to these verses, in chapter four, we find a call to be obedient to hearing the voice of God, and Hebrews 4:12-13 (ESV) reads, "*For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from God's sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account*". Words like "piercing", "discerning", "naked and exposed"; have the potential to evoke fear and shame in the listener, who dreads the notion of being exposed. In the midst of this dread however, the Hebrews writer introduces Jesus as high priest, who does not look on sinners with judgment but with grace. Cardinal Vanhoye explains that; "the priesthood exists to serve" (2009:113). This holds a profound new understanding of the Christian situation: While dreading the full exposure of their thoughts and hearts, the author of Hebrews invites his readers to draw near with full confidence, because Christ serves as their high priest; "the authority of Christ's word assures steadfastness of the faith, the certainty of His compassion triggers the dynamic of confidence" (Vanhoye 2009:112). From the closing verses of Hebrews chapter four the author extends an invitation to approach God with boldness, a new reality for believers, especially Jewish Christians accustomed to the work of the priesthood in Judaism. They now have a new high

priest in Jesus who established new grounds for a relationship with God. His calling, authority and works as high priest are further expounded upon in the opening verses of chapter five and Guthrie alludes to the fact that; “these verses serve as an opening for the great central exposition on the high priesthood of Christ” (1998:173) – a theme carried out extensively in the book of Hebrews.

4:14 The author wastes no time in affirming the position of Christ while simultaneously making a confession of faith in Jesus; “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God*” (v14). In comparison to earthly high priests, Jesus as the Son of God, did not serve in an earthly temple, but ascended straight into heaven, a contrast Kitsemaker draws our attention to with these words: “The Jewish high priest entered the inner sanctuary of the temple once a year standing in God’s presence momentarily. Jesus, by contrast, has entered the heavens and is always in the presence of God” (1984:124). It is necessary for the author to establish Christ’s position in heaven as permanent, since Guthrie affirms it as a pivotal foundation for our faith in Christ; “The Son, our high priest, has passed through the heavens provides a firm basis of the exhortation that follows” (1998:175).

4:15 Jesus’ exalted position as high priest does not remove Him from those He came to serve. The author of Hebrews cements our faith in Christ by drawing attention to His ability to sympathize with our weaknesses because He shared in our humanity. Thompson perceives these two facts as the basis for the author’s exhortation, “the fact that Jesus overcame human temptation and passed through the heavens is the basis of the exhortation to draw near to God” (2008:105). The author of Hebrews employs a double negative to assert the work of Christ and His sympathizing capacity as a basis for His saving work and the, “use of the double negative asserts forcefully that Jesus identifies Himself with those who are defenceless in their situation” (Lane 1991:114). The defencelessness of those Jesus came to save is because of our human weakness: “The word translated “weakness” (*astheneia*) can refer to sickness, physical weakness, general weakness related to being in the flesh, or moral weakness – here the context associates weakness with a propensity to sin” (Guthrie 1998: 175). The passage clearly states, that Jesus shared in our weakness, He was tempted to give in to that weakness but never did. He remained and without sin, yet His experience of human weakness made Him a compassionate high priest.

4:16 The throne of God was once a dreaded place, but the author now refers to it as “the throne of grace”. Cardinal Vanhoye defines the Christian’s new position in this way: “far from creating an abyss, between Christ and ourselves, our trials and weaknesses have become the privileged place of our encounter with God thanks to Christ” (2009:114). Christ’s constant position in the presence of God have completely changed our situation and solidified our new position. Cardinal Vanhoye further points out that the invitation to approach in “full confidence/boldly” does not only allude to a change in attitude, but also to the acceptance of what has been done on our behalf; “the Greek word (*parresia*) expresses not only feeling confident, but also acknowledging a right” (2009:114). Those who accept Christ as their high priest have a right to approach God’s throne and Thompson further establishes that the use of the word in the political sphere also meant the right not only to approach, but also to speak since the word meant, “freedom of speech or the candour to speak the truth to power” (2008:105). Furthermore, the throne is no longer a place of judgment but an opportunity to “*receive mercy and find grace in our time of need*”. Christ as high priest establishes the way for believers to approach God’s throne, speak openly and honestly with Him and, in light of their human weakness, receive the mercy and grace they need to overcome whatever current difficulties they are facing.

Hebrews 5:1-10 (NIVUK)

5 Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴And no one takes this honour on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’ ⁶And he says in another place, ‘You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.’

⁷During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The author opens chapter five by identifying the basic requirements every high priest had to fulfil, and then expounds upon it. The two basic qualifications as put forth by Bruce are: “1) a high priest must be able to sympathize with those he represents and, 2) a high priest must be divinely appointed to his office” (1990:118). The exposition of these two points follow in verses one to ten of chapter five, and follows a chiasmic structure that looks as follows, as supported by Ellingworth (1993:271):

- i. V 1 – divine calling
- ii. V 2 – sympathize with representatives
- i. V 5 , 10 – divine calling of Jesus
- ii. V 7 – suffering of Jesus unites Him with others

Regarding the structure of these texts, Ellingworth further the author’s use of tenses in the construction of his sentences, “verses 1-4 is marked by the use of present tense in a general description of the high priest’s task, while verses 5-10 in the aorist, describes the priesthood of Christ and uniqueness of it” (1993:271). This pattern is also supported by Pfitzner (1997:90-91). For the purpose of our studies we will use these two distinct sections illustrated in the table below to expound on the superiority of the priesthood of Christ as several commentators unpacked it.

High Priest	Christ as High Priest
<p>V1 Relating to our humanity: Every high priest is selected from the people they live among and represent (Bruce:1990: 119). Beset with his own weakness, he can relate to those he represents who are also weak (Vanhoye 2009: 117).</p> <p>Offerings and Gifts: On behalf of all people, he can offer sacrifices but must do so first for himself, because of his own weakness, and then for the sins of the people (Vanhoye 2009:117) Morris in Gaebelein specifies that “gifts and offerings” pertained to all matters concerning God as the priest’s function – not only offerings for sin, but also for prayer and petition (1981:47).</p>	<p>V 5 The author quotes Ps 2:7 and uses it as an affirmation of Christ’s dignity as the exalted Son. He also did this in Hebrews 1:5. Pfitzner establishes that Christ did not call himself to the office of priesthood but that his divine appointment is suggested already by the use of the royal title of Christ as “the anointed one” (1997:91).</p> <p>Morris in Gaebelein explains the identification of Jesus as “Christ” in this verse affirms the author’s claim of Jesus as God’s chosen offer already fulfils the qualification of being called to fulfil God’s redemptive plan (1981:48)</p>

<p>V2 The high priest is “able to deal gently with” (<i>metriopathein</i>) – a difficult word to translate, which relates to weakness. Morris in Gaebelain clarifies that the word means that the earthly high priest is at one with his people, understanding their need for forgiveness, acknowledging their weakness and not indifferent to moral lapses, since he shares in that same weakness (1981:47) Guthrie in support reiterates, “the high priest acts as representative on behalf of the people making atonement for their sins” (1998:188).</p>	<p>V 6 and V 10 The use of Psalm 110:4 indicates the contrast of Christ’s priesthood to that of the Leviticus priests, namely, “forever [which] is a contrast, since Jesus’ priesthood will never pass away” (Morris in Gaebelain 1981: 49). Another contrast brought to our attention by the author is the order of Christ’s priesthood, which is a different one as instated through the Mosaic Law. It was under the order of that like Melchizedek as Hagner asserts: “Melchizedek was both priest and king (Gen 14:18), Jesus is also priest and king and therefore corresponds to Melchizedek” (1983:81). The new order of Christ’s priesthood is again affirmed in verse 10, and draws the train of thought to its conclusion.</p>
<p>V3 The author alludes to the necessity for the high priest to make atonement for his own sins before he makes atonement for the sins of the people; Kistemaker refers to the obvious reference of Lev 9:7; 16:6 and 15-16 where Aaron was instructed to make a sacrifice for himself as high priest and for the people he represents (1984:130)</p>	<p>V7 Pfirtzner indicates that this verse refers to Jesus’ entire life and fear of death (1997:93), but Hagner believes it refers to Jesus’ prayer to be delivered from death in the Garden of Gethsemane (1983:81). Either way, it indicates Christ’s suffering in the weakness of His flesh, while remaining obedient to God in spite of His fear. His prayers were heard. Hagner points out that Jesus was not delivered from death, but through death, referring to His resurrection from the dead after He suffered: “Because of His submission to God’s will, the prayer of Jesus was heard in a much greater way than otherwise would have been possible” (1983:81).</p>
<p>V4 Hagner refers to the Old Testament texts in Exodus 28:1 and Numbers 25:13 which clearly shows that the priesthood was not an office people entered into freely but rather they were called into it by God as Aaron and his descendants were (1983:80).</p>	<p>V8-9 These verses both contain phrases that raise questions, as the author claims Christ “learned obedience from suffering”, and that He was “made perfect” to which Morris in Gaebelain explains, “Jesus did not pass from disobedience to obedience, rather He learned obedience by actually obeying” (1981:50). In view of this Bruce refers to Christ disavowing Himself of His lofty position to fulfil the will of His Father</p>

	<p>down to the detail as he also remembers Jesus baptism in Matt 3:15 – Jesus was not baptized in repentance of His sins, but rather acted out of obedience to fulfil righteousness (1990:131). In being obedient even unto death, Jesus suffered greatly. We can therefore conclude that Jesus perfected the will of God through His obedience which caused Him great suffering, but in the process He was restored to His perfect position as the agent who accomplished eternal salvation because of His perfect obedience, thus fulfilling God’s plan for redemption, forever.</p>
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3.1.5 Hebrews 7

Hebrews chapter seven explores the unique priesthood of Melchizedek in comparison to the Levitical Priesthood, and the manner in which Melchizedek’s priesthood was similar to the priesthood of Christ. The author is not conveying that Christ’s priesthood is in the order of Melchizedek, but rather, Melchizedek’s priesthood was an example of Christ’s expected priesthood. Cardinal Vanhoye clarifies that Christ is the focus and an exaggeration of Melchizedek was never the author’s intent, rather, “the believers are invited to consider the biblical personage of Melchizedek in order to recognize him a prefiguration of the glorified Christ” (2009:152). In view of this, we will not be doing a detailed exegesis on this chapter, but instead a brief overview in order to gain an understanding to the relevance of the comparison of Christ’s priesthood to that of Melchizedek’s, and draw a conclusion to why this was relevant for the Hebrew Christians, and what it means for readers today.

Hebrews 7:1-10 (NIVUK)

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him,² and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace’.³ Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever.⁴ Just think how great he was: even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!⁵ Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become

priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, from their fellow Israelites – even though they also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. ⁹ One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, ¹⁰ because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

In the opening of chapter seven, the author introduces Melchizedek from the brief introduction we have of him in the Old Testament scriptures. The specific scripture in mind is Genesis 14:18-20:

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. ²⁰ And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

We do not have much of an introduction to this significant figure, but as Bruce points out, “The author finds as much significance in what is not said about Melchizedek as he does in what is said about him” (1990:157). The first noteworthy thing the author points out, which is also mentioned in the Genesis passage, is his name. Apparent during this time was a fascination with who Melchizedek was. Lindars refer to the writings of Philo, who in his *Allegory of the Laws III*, sets out to expound Genesis 14: “Philo equates Melchizedek allegorically with reason, which is the ruler of the passions” (1995:73). Lindars prevails that the author of Hebrews must have had a knowledge of Philo’s writing, since it was him who referred to Melchizedek’s name. The first part, (*Melek*) is the Hebrew word for King and the second part (*zedek*), is the Hebrew word for righteousness, which consequently translates Melchizedek as “King of Righteousness” while “King of Salem” translates as “King of Peace” since “salem” is derived from the Hebrew word for peace (*shalom*).

A fact that is not mentioned in the Genesis passage, but caught the author’s attention and fascination, is that there is no mention of Melchizedek’s lineage, nor are there details given about his priesthood, which leaves a lot of room for interpretation to his significance. Cardinal Vanhoye expounds this interpretation between the Son (Christ) and Melchizedek by referring to the resurrected, glorified Christ:

The only interpretation that first is the one which applies the text to the glorified Christ, one can say of the risen Christ that He is a man, “without father, without mother, without genealogy,” for His resurrection was a new beginning of His human nature, in which neither human father nor human mother intervened and which made of Him a “first-born” (Heb 1:6) (2009:156-157).

With this in mind, we can conclude that the author is comparing Melchizedek’s priesthood with that of the glorified Christ, and he spends the rest of chapter seven expounding and comparing the priesthood of Christ to that of the Levites.

Hebrews 7:11-17

¹¹ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood – and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood – why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. ¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is declared: ‘You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.’

The author addresses several objections which may have been drawn up against accepting the priesthood of Christ, since it did not adhere to the outward regulations and laws set for priests in Exodus and Leviticus. Therefore, the author launches a full explanation on how the priesthood of Christ is different from that of the Levitical priests, and his strongest argument appears in verse 16, when the author proclaims, “*one who has become a priest not based on the regulation of ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life*”. Kistemaker indicates that the expression “indestructible life” is unique in the New Testament while indicating how it relates to Jesus in comparison to the Levitical Priests: “A Levitical priest served on a temporary basis because he eventually died, and a Levitical priest also served on the basis of external law which gave him the privilege of service; Jesus serves because of an inward power that characterizes an endless life” (1984:196). Jesus has indestructible life, though He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, death did not master Him, but instead He rose from the dead, overcoming sin and death and took His place as

intercessor for all mankind in the throne-room of heaven. Hebrews 7:17 quotes Psalm 110:4 “For it is declared: You are priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” – the one declaring is God, naming the Son as the priest of a new order who has an indestructible priesthood, since His life is also indestructible.

Hebrews 7:18-28

¹⁸ The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. ²⁰ And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest for ever.”’ ²² Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. ²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. ²⁶ Such a high priest truly meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.

In the remainder of Hebrews chapter seven, the author sets forth the truth of Christ’s superiority to the Levitical priesthood in further detail. The author starts by alluding to the “former regulation” to which Kistemaker adds, “the adjective *former* and noun *regulation* actually means “introductory” or “that which precedes” (1984:197). If we had to illustrate it in modern terms, the author is conveying that the former regulations under the Levitical priesthood was like a movie preview, you could deduce the gist of the plot, but it was not actually the story itself. Jesus introduces the better hope by which we draw near to God. Not by the oath of humans, but by the oath of God Himself. The author once again quotes Psalm 110:4 as the oath God proclaims over the Son. The priesthood of Christ is “better” since it is not constrained by mortality. It cannot pass away, because Jesus cannot pass away. Pfitzner, on the permanence of Christ’s priesthood, explains what this means: “the permanence of Christ means the permanence of His office, and thus complete effectiveness (v25). He can offer perfect salvation by the power of an indestructible life” (1997:113). The author thus effectively sets forth that it would be ludicrous for the Jewish Christians to want to

revert back to Judaism, since it was only a prelude to the greater reality brought in through Christ. Christ is superior to the carnal priests in so many ways, but most of all because of His resurrection and indestructible life. His perfect sacrifice which have done away with ritual sacrifices, have opened up a manner to draw near to God without the help of an earthly priest, since the priest of this better hope was appointed by God as Son, and has been made perfect forever.

3.2 Superiority of Faith

The selected texts makes a strong case for the superiority of the Hebrew Christian's faith in Christ, and therefore we have chosen to exegete them as they pertain to the purpose of our studies – an encouragement toward faith in Christ. Apart from the superiority of Christ, encouraging faith in Christ is the second focal point of the book of Hebrews (Elwell and Yarbrough 2013:332).

3.2.1 Hebrews 3:7-4:12;

3.2.2 Hebrews 5:11-6:9; 6:13-20

3.2.1 Hebrews 3:7-4:12 (NIVUK)

Hebrews 3:7-19

⁷ So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice,⁸ do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness, ⁹ where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for forty years they saw what I did. ¹⁰ That is why I was angry with that generation; I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways."¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."¹² See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. ¹⁵ As has just been said: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.' ¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

3: 7-11 The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95:7-11 which holds an example of Israel who did not keep to the hope God promised them, who stood on the threshold of entering the promised land yet failed to inherit it, because of their faithlessness. Hughes makes a reference to the familiarity this community of Jewish Christians would have had with these words from Psalm 95, since it served as a call to worship every Sabbath evening, every Jewish ear would perk up as they heard “*Today, if you hear His voice...*” (1993:98). The Psalm itself refers to Israel’s rebellion at Masah and Meribah (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:2-13), but as Pfitzner clarifies, the author’s main focus was the rebellion at Kadesh: “God’s answer to the rebellion was that none of those who had tested his patience by not listening to His voice, despite seeing His glory through signs and wonders, would enter the land He swore to them” (1997:76). In this reference, it becomes apparent that the author is simultaneously warning the Hebrew Christians that they are in danger of not receiving the promise of God, if they reject His Word through Jesus. The author of Hebrews specifically identifies the speaker in verse seven as the Holy Spirit, to which Hagner comments:

The author views Scripture (the Old Testament) as the word spoken by God, the Holy Spirit is similarly said to be the speaker in Scripture in Hebrews 10:15. The human authors are not denied, but they are not important to the author since in the last analysis it is God who is responsible for what they say (1983:63).

As a result, the author of Hebrews is indicating that it is not his own opinion leading him to make this warning against faithlessness, but God Himself warning them. The warning God is making was in refusing the wilderness generation entrance into His promised “rest” (v11). Morris in Gaeblein alludes to the author of Hebrews’ use of the verb “enter” (*eiserchomai*); in summary, “he uses it seventeen times, eleven of those seventeen times in chapters three to four” (1981:35). Clearly the author of Hebrews had in mind the definite action of entering into God’s divine plan. It also means that there could be the danger of remaining outside of God’s promises, if the “step of faith” is not taken forward and into it. “Rest” (*katapausis*) as Morris comments on this translation of the word, “points to a place of blessing where there is no more striving but only relaxation in the presence of God and in the certainty that there is no cause for fear” (1981:35).

3:12-14 In view of the caution given from Psalm 95, the author of Hebrews now warns his readers not “*turn away from the Living God*” (v12). Morris in Gaebelien refers to the argument some of these Jewish Christians may have had in turning back to Judaism since they would in essence still be serving the same God: “but turning away would mean rejecting God’s highest revelation through Christ, no matter how many of the preliminary revelations are retained” (1981:36). To this Pfitzner points out that the noun formed from the verb “turns away” is (*apostasis*). This in turn refers to the author’s main concern, the integrity of the whole group if one person should turn away from God, and the ultimate judgment they will be subjected to if they do (1997:79). Therefore, the encouragement from verse thirteen for the Hebrew Christians to “*encourage one another*” is so strong. The author is in effect saying that it is their responsibility as a community, or as the family of God (3:1) to keep each other fixed firmly in their faith while it is still “today”. Lane exhorts that the use of the word “*Today*” implies the continued voice of God that speaks through the Gospel and the Scriptures (Ps 95), but, “its perspective extends from the present to the approaching (*parousia*) and judgment” (1991:87). Therefore, the reference to “*Today*” as the day of salvation means that every day that passes we are one day closer to that day, the Day of the Lord. Then He will come on the clouds and take His bride up to heaven, He will judge the nations. Every day He waits is a day of His patience and long suffering – to give as many as possible the opportunity to turn. While it is still “*Today*” there remains the opportunity turn around and turn back to Jesus. But even more than the warnings against damaging the integrity of the community, or the fear of judgment, the author explains the greatest reason for not hardening their hearts toward God; “*we have come to share in Christ*” (v14); “the community has been caught up in the narrative of the one who triumphed over death and is now in heaven, they have become participants in a heavenly calling” (Thompson: 2008: 93). But this heavenly calling is conditional, as the author says it depends on “*holding our original conviction and standing firm until the end*”.

3:15-19 In summary of chapter three, the author now asks three rhetorical questions he seems to assume this community of Hebrew Christians would know the answers to, since they refer to the familiar history of their ancestors. In verse sixteen the author points out that it was those who saw God’s miracles and were led out of Egypt who

rebelled (Exodus 17). In verse seventeen the author reminds the Hebrew Christians of God's anger against their ancestors which lasted forty years until each of those who rebelled died in the wilderness (Numbers 13-14). Lastly, the author identifies those who were refused entrance into His rest as the ones who sinned against and disobeyed Him, in verse seventeen. Kistemaker identifies why the sin of unbelief is such a grave trespass with this admonition: "the rebellious Israelites had to perish in the desert because of their unbelief, since it is a sin of openly refusing to believe God, unbelief provokes God, unbelief robs God of His glory and robs the unbeliever the privilege of God's blessings" (1984:97). The warning is made apparent; unbelief is a great sin against God and inhibits the blessing of the fulfilment of His promises to those who disbelieve Him. As evident from the history of Israel in the wilderness, the sin of unbelief leads to death as none of them received their inheritance but died in the desert. Rejecting Christ also leads to death, eternal death.

Hebrews 4:1-12

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."' And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'On the seventh day God rested from all his works.'⁵ And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.'⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it 'Today'. This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

4:1-5 In the first five verses of Hebrews chapter four, the author talks about rest. Rest occurs after completion and bears a feeling of satisfaction or fulfilment. A thought that

is further reinforced by the author's referral to God's rest on the seventh day after He had created the universe. Thompson clarifies the type of rest the author is conveying in Hebrews 4 by referring to Psalm 95:11 which the author quotes in verse five:

Using the rabbinic hermeneutical principle, according to which the same word in two different passages means the same, the author quotes Gen 2:2 "*God rested*" (*katēpausen*) alongside "*they shall never enter my rest*" (*katēpausis*) and concludes that the rest described here is the Sabbath rest in Genesis (2008:95)

The type of rest believers inherit is not only rest from being weary, but the satisfaction of being able to rest because things have reached its fulfilment. Thompson refers to this type of rest as "the transcending rest of God" (2008:95); which means that the rest believers experience in Christ are not dependant on circumstances but on the promise. In other words, circumstances can go from bad to worse, but it will hold no power to sway the ultimate outcome of entering into God's rest. Therefore, the author's warning in Hebrews 4:1-3 is for the Hebrew Christians not to disqualify themselves from entry into this promised rest, as their ancestors did. Hughes points out that "The Good News" that was brought refers to the incident in Numbers 14, when the twelve spies returned from scouting the Promised Land, and only Joshua and Caleb had a good report, supported by their faith of what God could accomplish on their behalf. As a result; "many in Israel believed in God, but only two truly trusted God and found rest" (1993:108). The author of Hebrews says: "*For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed*" (v2) – Joshua and Caleb knew and believed that God would give them victory with their whole hearts, they trusted God. Their response to God was right; "here the term "faith" (*pistis*) refers to the attitude of trusting God wholeheartedly" (Morris in Gaebelin 1981: 40). In Hebrews 4:3, the author implies that the Hebrew Christians were not like their unbelieving and untrusting ancestors but rather received the message with the right attitude of wholehearted trust and therefore they could enter God's rest. Belief in God is important, but trusting God to be true, will bring us into His transcendent rest.

4:6-8 Israel's history of not entering the rest of God is repeated here, along with the warning not to harden their hearts toward God as their ancestors did. The author not only refers to those who did not enter the Promised Land because of their

disobedience, but now also says that those who did, did not completely enter God's rest either, and that is why the Lord had set another day "today"; "in Josh 22:4, Joshua announced that God had given His people rest, but this rest, like the rest brought by David (2 Sm 7:1,11) and Solomon (1 Kings 8:56) was at best a scant experience of the rest God intended for His people" (Hagner 1983:76). There was another greater rest expected and anticipated, one that would be brought in through the Messiah.

4:9-12 The rest God had intended for His people were brought in through Jesus. This rest, though experienced in part, will one day be brought to completion upon Christ's return. The "Sabbath-rest" in verse 9 is not the same word used for rest in verses 4-5. Hagner explains; "the author deliberately uses the word "Sabbath-rest" (*sabbatismos*), in order to emphasize the rest he is speaking of is of an eschatological order" (1983:76). Therefore, the author encourages the Hebrew Christians, to hold fast to the faith they profess and not disobey God because of their unbelief, and so disqualify themselves from entering God's rest. The author completes his exhortation with a strong illustration of remaining obedient, and Kistemaker illustrates the effectiveness of the Word of God being compared to the image of a double edged sword in verses 12-13: "The symbolism conveys the message that God's judgment is stern, righteous and awful, God holds the power, those who refuse to listen to His Word face judgment and death, while those who obey enter God's rest and have eternal life" (1984:117). Israel's sin of unbelief proved that they did not trust God when His word was spoken to them, they did not trust God to accomplish victory for them as Joshua and Caleb did. If the "double edged sword" was taken to reveal the thoughts and attitudes of Caleb and Joshua's hearts in Numbers 12 however, they would have remained blameless because of their faith. The author of Hebrews is calling these Christians to a similar exposure, if God should reveal the attitude of their hearts and thoughts, would they also be revealed blameless, or would they reveal a lack of trust and faith?

3.2.2 Hebrews 5:11-6:9 (NIVUK)

¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being

still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

***6** ¹Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, ² instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And God permitting, we will do so. ⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ 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. 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. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

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. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Pfitzner contends that Hebrews 5:11-6:12 (and 13-20) marks a turning point in the author's argument. In the preceding verses, the author was still explaining the priesthood of Christ, and then, almost as if abruptly interrupting himself, the focus shifts from teaching, to the community themselves. In order to bring this message across, the author uses strong imagery to make an impact on the Hebrew Christians.

5:11-14 The first image the author resorts to is "milk and solids". For any person the meaning is apparent. Babies need milk in order to grow, since their digestive system cannot process and absorb solid food yet. However, as they mature, milk can gradually be exchanged for more solid food until their digestive systems have fully adapted to processing and absorbing food, keeping them healthy and making them strong. This metaphor was not only logical but also commonplace; "metaphors of milk and solid food are common in Hellenistic moral philosophy, especially in describing stages of instruction" (Pfitzner 1997: 95). Clearly the author of Hebrews was unimpressed and quite concerned over the lack of progress these Christians were

making, he expected them to be teaching others, or “feeding others” but they could not even feed themselves properly. Lane comments that the author must have regarded this community as mature, but was calling them back to take a stance of conviction and boldness; “the community have deviated from its earlier course and become sluggish in understanding, their regression to infancy must have been recent, perhaps in an attempt to sidestep their persecution, though it threatened their integrity” (1991:135). The author thus sets out in Hebrews 5:11-6:12 to remind these Hebrew Christians not to “regress back to infancy”, but to remember what they have gained and experienced from their faith in Jesus as Christ and to grow in it. In verse 14, apart from the author using the metaphor of eating solid food, he also says “the mature have trained themselves”. Another example of this phenomenon, as Thompson points out, was used in Hellenistic educational theory; “the athletic metaphor of practice and training were commonly used to communicate discipline of those who were properly nourished as they exercised their minds toward maturity” (2008:120). The author was calling the Hebrew Christians to discipline themselves in their faith in order to grow into maturity as strong, capable and persevering Christians.

6:1-3 In this process of being called back to maturity of faith, the author now counts himself alongside the Hebrew Christians with “*let us move beyond elementary teachings and toward maturity*”. He then starts to list what he considers to be “*foundational teachings*”. With the exposition of Morris in Gaebelien, we will list them in the table below. For the purpose of our studies, we will identify these elementary teachings of the time Hebrews was written, and how they may relate to our modern day. It is apparent that being occupied with the elementary teachings of our faith still has the ability to distract believers and dull their minds, stunting their growth and keeping them from maturing in their faith.

Elementary Teaching	Hebrews’ Understanding	Modern Relevance
<i>“repentance from acts that lead to death”</i>	<i>Repentance was the first act required and preached by John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples, and therefore</i>	Repentance is still a foundational act for new believers coming to faith – there has to be a turn from acts that lead to

	<i>the most basic requirement of faith; it's an acknowledgment also of acts that lead to death – or dead works which refer to legalistic rituals of Judaism as well as immoral acts and sin</i>	death and a surrender of religious acts in exchange for acting out of the power of the Holy Spirit who enables genuine transformation
<i>“and of faith in God”</i>	<i>Faith (pistis) not merely believing, but refers to a wholehearted trust in God which has a relational element</i>	Faith remains a matter of belief and trust in the unseen, it is not a decision to rationalise or argue into existence, but rather an entry into relationship with an unseen God
<i>“Instruction about cleansing rites”</i>	<i>(Baptismōn) apart from Christian baptism, the word was also used for Jewish cleansing ceremonies. In comparison to other places where Christian baptism is referred to where the word is used in the singular, here it is plural, which alludes to the use of it referring to Jewish cleansing rites and purification ceremonies</i>	In order for people to enter into relationship with God, or to enter into the presence of God for worship, nothing else is required except believing in Jesus Christ. Arguments about Pedobaptism or believer baptism, or physical requirements for participation in worship and the life of the church are secondary to faith in Christ
<i>“laying on of hands,”</i>	<i>In Christian practice the action was associated with commissioning for ministry but it was also connected with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit</i>	Arguments about who receives the Holy Spirit and why, should not distract us from the more important reality that The Lord uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary callings through empowering them through the Holy Spirit, and He can empower anyone, anywhere for any task
<i>“the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment”</i>	<i>Two topics that went together and was especially important to Jews and Christians alike;</i>	Living in the knowledge that there is life after death and that believers are being prepared for an

	<i>rising from the dead and having to give an account to God would be of great importance to new converts who at the time believed death was the end of everything</i>	eternal kingdom, gives them perspective on their lives and hope in their faith and urgency in their witness, which is of greater importance than arguing the fine details of how this will be accomplished and when with other believers and non-believers
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(*Italics*= Morris in Gaebelien 1981:53-54)

Hebrews 6:13-19 (NIVUK)

¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' ¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. ¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. ¹⁸ God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

There is a transition apparent between Hebrews 6:12's exhortation to continue to mature in their faith and Hebrews 6:13-20, which introduces a new topic through a teaching from the Old Testament. The book of Hebrews flows from exhortation to exposition, as is clearly identified by Lane: "the writer turns from exhortation to an exposition of the reliability of the divine promise extended to Christians through the high priestly ministry of Christ" (1991: 148). Verses 13-15 focus on Abraham's example of faith, verses 16-18 focus on God's oath and His reliability, while verses 19-20 – the final ones in this section – introduce the hope in the fulfilment of God's promises through Christ's priestly ministry. The process is thus brought to completion. The exposition the author started in Hebrews 5:11 on Christ's priestly ministry is brought back into focus at the close of chapter six.

6:13-15 The author of Hebrews regularly uses Abraham as an example of faith, since he trusted God wholeheartedly, even when his circumstances seemed to testify the opposite. Abraham believed God, Guthrie expounds on the heroic faith of Abraham; “he stayed the course of sacrifice through intense, prolonged testing and became a paradigmatic receptor of God’s covenant promise” (1998: 241). The Hebrew Christians were experiencing similar challenges to their faith; they knew the promise they possessed in Christ, but was not able to see it fulfilled completely yet. In view of this, the author is encouraging them to mimic the faith of Abraham and believe God, who swore by Himself to fulfil His promises.

6:16-18 Lane alludes to the fact that these verses carry a distinctive judicial tone as the language the author chose was identical to the language used in a court of law (1991:148). A fact Thompson supports: “the author elaborates on the certainty of the oath by piling images of certainty drawn especially from the law court” (2008:138). The principle is that people call on something greater than themselves in order to affirm the word of their testimonies, they call on God to assure the reliability of an oath. Thompson further points to the words the author used to put an end to all dispute of God’s own reliability:

“The phrases “beyond dispute” (*antilogias peras*) and “for confirmation” (*es bebaiōsin*) are technical terms used in the law courts, the former refers to an objection in a trial while the latter refers to the legally valid guarantee” (2008:138)

The image of a television court-room of people lifting up their right hand and reciting to “tell the truth the whole truth, so help me God” comes to mind. The author is conveying that God is the one “on trial” swearing an oath to confirm His promise; the one who keeps and validates everyone’s promises is now the one taking that oath Himself, validating that He will bring it to fulfilment. How could He not be trusted? God “guaranteed” (*emesiteusen*) His promise and no greater guarantee exists, since there is only one thing impossible for God, and that is to lie; it gave men “two unchangeable things”, the promise and the oath, and once God had spoken it was inconceivable that either should alter” (Morris in Gaebelein 1981: 60).

6:19-20 The outcome of God's reliability for the Hebrew Christians and every other believer is hope. Hope that anchors the soul; "our hope, based on His promises anchor our souls, since we are moored to an immovable object, God's throne" (Bruce 1990:155). The one who anchors us to God's throne is Jesus, who through His sacrifice and resurrection, have fulfilled God's oath and promises. The image portrays Christ as High Priest, entering heaven and passing through the holy of holies to make atonement for our sins. He is the promise and the forerunner and all believers can follow Him through the curtain which once separated men from God; "Christian hope is thus firmly anchored to God's own throne to which the Son has been exalted, as the phrase "on our behalf" alludes to His perfect sacrifice as well as His continual intercession" (Pfitzner 1997: 103). Christ being our "anchor" (*ankyra*), is a literal representation of what this means for believers. Regardless of how stormy life may become - whether persecution increase or circumstances worsen - believers have an anchor in Christ who keep them firm, secure and stable in God's promise. Apart from being kept securely in Christ, His position as High Priest means He lives to intercede for believers in the midst of trouble: "stability of soul thus stems from all the power and provisions to be found as we stand before the face of God" (Guthrie 1998: 244).

3.3 Superiority of Christ's Sacrifice in Comparison

3.3.1 Hebrews 2:5-18;

3.3.2 Hebrews 9:1-10: 18;

3.3.3 Hebrews 13:11-12;

3.3.1 Hebrews 2:5-18 (NIVUK)

⁵It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶But there is a place where someone has testified: 'What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him? ⁷You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honour ⁸and put everything under their feet. In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. ⁹But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. ¹⁰In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ¹²He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and

sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises'. ¹³ And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again he says, 'Here am I, and the children God has given me. ¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

2:5-9 The Hebrews' understanding was that angels enjoyed a more exalted position than humanity, a thought supported by O'Brien as he refers to the biblical evidence for angelic administration of the world in the song of Moses in Dt 32:8: "The reading implies that the administration of the nations had been parcelled out among a number of angelic powers" (2010:94). He further alludes to the fact that "the world to come" refers to the New Kingdom brought in, which will not be subjected to angels, but to the exalted Christ seated on the throne. In this new order all other authority will be under His rule and authority as already evident in Hebrews 1:13 "*God never said to an angel, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your control'*". In verses 6-8 the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 8:4-6, as the author is expressing his awe for God's consideration toward humanity; the Psalmist and the author of Hebrews were likely thinking of Genesis 1:26 where God said, "*Let us make man in our image, and let him rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...*" - God gave man dominion over His creation. Now God had honoured humanity, by sending His Son to become one of them. Though it was an honour for humanity, it was a humiliation for Christ to be subjected to human form, but He did so willingly and lovingly. Lane comments that the purpose of Jesus' humiliation to human condition is expressed in the clause in v 9 '*that He might taste death for everyone*'; "this Christological reading of the text form a confession of faith as it celebrates the three successive moments of the redemptive drama, the incarnation (past), the exaltation (present) and the glorification (future) in the final victory of Jesus" (1991:48). The author of Hebrews is turning the focus of these Hebrew Christians away from their present sufferings toward the anticipation of their glorious and eternal future, though there is an element of what Christ has accomplished, but that cannot be seen or completely experienced yet: "Hebrews affirms that we live in the overlap of the two ages, the present age and the age to come" (O'Brien 2010:97). In this reality, it will call for perseverance and focus on the

one “who suffered death for everyone” until everything is brought to completion under Him.

2:10 In this verse the author is affirming the path from suffering to glory, in this regard Pfitzner summarizes this verse by paraphrasing; “We can recapture the total effect by paraphrasing thus: ‘in leading the children to glory, God brought the first leader to his end/goal through suffering’” (1997:65). Perhaps these Hebrew Christians felt that they were suffering unnecessarily, and that something was terribly wrong. To put it in modern terms, perhaps they were asking, “why do bad things happen to good people?” Jesus’ sacrifice demonstrated that suffering didn’t mean utter destruction, but was rather the necessary path to glory. A path He shared in as their “pioneer”; “since Christ our Saviour blazed the trail of salvation that we can now follow through a series of perfections through which He became complete in experiencing obedience in human flesh” (Hughes 1993: 66). Suffering teaches patience and obedience and Jesus went through every temptation we can imagine yet remained obedient. With every hurdle to obedience He overcame, it brought Him one step closer to glory.

2:11-13 In these verses the author makes it seem as if Christ Himself is speaking to the suffering Christians, encouraging them toward faith as He relates to them. As Christ was made perfect through His obedience to the Father, so Jesus encourages the believers that they, too, are being made holy through what they are suffering. They can trust the process, because He is the one making them holy: “God has commissioned this task to the Son who has sanctified the people by His blood, thus the community that struggles with suffering is experiencing solidarity with their Saviour” (Thompson 2008:74). Jesus’ solidarity in turn is further emphasised by the author as he quotes Psalm 22:22, and credits these words to Christ Himself singing in the assembly before God over those being made holy through their suffering. Bruce makes a profound statement which brings great depth to the use of this passage; “it is the Psalms’ opening words Jesus took upon His own lips at the hour of His greatest dereliction on the cross – it is also Christ speaking in the second part of the psalm giving public thanksgiving as the once crucified now exalted Christ sings praises” (1990:82). These Hebrew Christians could undoubtedly relate, perhaps they were also thinking “My God, why have You forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1) in the midst of growing persecution. The author of Hebrews is highlighting this: Christ’s suffering on the cross

ultimately brought them all into a new standing with God, the same place of standing to where Christ after His suffering ascended, in order to present redeemed humanity before the Father as His brothers and sisters. As sure as Christ's position in heaven, no amount of suffering could remove these Christians from that redeemed position, but would only bring them further into it. The author further quotes Isaiah 8:17-18; *"And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again he says, 'Here am I, and the children God has given me (v13), which once again affirms Christ's solidarity with the believers and their exalted position through Christ's work on the cross.*

2:14-18 The author of Hebrews has made clear in these verses that Christ's work has made those who put their trust in Him, God's children. Christ can relate to them and their situation, but now the author clarifies that Jesus not only relates to them, but also that He had been made exactly like them, a fact the author also reiterates in 2:11. Additionally, in verse 14 he explicitly states, *"Since the children have flesh and blood, he shared in their humanity"* – Kistemaker points out that the original Greek reversed the words "flesh and blood" to actually say "blood and flesh" in order to emphasize the word "blood"; "the ties that bind us to Christ are blood, He is one of us, He became fully human, He is our blood brother" (1984:75). The emphasis on the blood relation Christ has with us is of great importance since for that reason He was able to *"break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil" (14b).*

The purpose of Jesus' incarnation and sharing in our humanity was such that He could die on our behalf. It is only through facing the great power of death Himself that He was victorious in conquering it. Hagner also states; "the devil and death are clearly overcome in Christ's work, even if in this interim period between the cross and the return of Christ, we do not see the full effects of Christ's victory" (1983:52). Perhaps that is why the author goes on to say that Jesus delivered humanity, not only from death, but from the *"fear of death"* (v15). Since death is still a universal reality for all living things, His victory over death does not mean an escape from the physical reality of death, but rather the hope of eternal life without the fear of condemnation for our sins; "Jesus paid the penalty of sin by giving His life and set us free from the curse of death - Jesus took the weapon of death out of Satan's hands" (Kistemaker 1984:75).

For a community who was possibly being threatened with the reality of death through persecution, this message would be of great value. It meant that even if they should have to suffer unto death, it was not final. Death had lost its power over them. Furthermore, God's love for humanity is emphasized in verse 16, since Jesus did not take on an angelic form, but became human, in order to help "Abraham's descendants". Bruce refers to verse 17 when he says; "Christ's solidarity with His brethren is emphasized – in order to serve them as high priest he was obliged to become completely like His brother and sisters" (1990:87). Along with the desire to serve those He loves by becoming exactly like them. He subjected Himself to human suffering, the same suffering these Hebrew Christians were facing, and He did suffer it unto death. The importance of the message the author was bringing across becomes clear – they had a faithful and merciful high priest who was able to help them as they go through their own suffering; "the emphasis is not only on the high priesthood of Christ, but on His significance as the answer to the crisis facing the people" (Thompson 2008: 76).

3.3.2 Hebrews 9:1-10:18 (NIVUK)

We will now set forth how Christ's sacrifice as fulfilment of the old requirements, was superior to that which foreshadowed Him under the Law. For the purpose of our studies, we want to prove that God had set a standard for His holiness and that standard was met and fulfilled in Christ on our behalf. No other means of salvation is necessary or available.

a) Christ's Sacrifice in Comparison to Worship in the Earthly Tabernacle

Hebrews 9:11-14 (NIVUK)

¹¹ But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the

eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

In reference to the outline of verses 11-14, O'Brien posits:

The passage consists of two lengthy sentences, the first (v11-12) deals with Christ's entry into the heavenly sanctuary, while the second (v13-14) spells out the consequences for believers of Christ's sacrifice in contrast with those of the Levitical system (2010:318).

In keeping with this pattern, we will now submit our exegesis of these passages following O'Brien's suggestion.

9:11-12 In the preceding verses, the author of Hebrews specifically referred to the worship under the Old Covenant on the Day of Atonement as set forth in Leviticus 16, where the High Priest would enter on behalf of all Israel to make a sacrifice for the people's sins. The reality in which this system existed, constituted that only one person was able to enter the Holy of Holies, and this only once a year to make atonement for sins. There was no free access into the presence of God. Now in contrast, Jesus also enters to make atonement for people's sins, and the author of Hebrews opens with the words, "*Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here*" which speaks of a complete reformation and in Christ, "the shadows have given way to the perfect abiding reality" (Bruce 1990: 212).

Jesus did not make His atoning sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, but instead went into the heavenly tabernacle, not made with human hands, that same tabernacle God told Moses to fashion the earthly tabernacle after in Ex 25:40: "just as the Levitical high priest went through the curtain separating the two tents, the exalted Christ now went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle" (Thompson 2008:186). In verse twelve the author continues that Christ did not enter with the blood of calves and bulls, but by His own blood. Bruce alludes to a previous misunderstanding surrounding this text, where it was believed that Christ first had to enter heaven and sprinkle His own blood on the heavenly altar. In fact this adds a secondary action to the work of Christ which makes it seem as if Christ's work wasn't finished until He ascended to heaven to make atonement; "no such division of our Lord's sacrifice is envisaged

under the New Covenant, instead when Christ offered up His life on the cross He accomplished what the Levitical priests performed in type” (1990:214).

Thompson brings further clarity as he agrees with Bruce: “Blood is not the substance that the exalted Christ brings into the sanctuary, but a metaphor for Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself” (2008:186). Jesus’ willing sacrifice of Himself is in mind here, different to the High Priest, who sacrificed the life of another in order to make atonement, Christ was both High Priest and sacrifice, and in this act secured eternal redemption. O’Brien emphasizes the difference this illustrates between the Old and New Covenant brought in through Christ: “the modes of access under the two covenants’ sharp contrast becomes apparent between the involuntary, passive sacrifice of animals and the active obedience of Christ who willingly made Himself a sacrifice for sins” (2010:322). Access into God’s presence has thus been opened through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. No longer is access only granted to the High Priest once a year, but because Jesus entered as “forerunner” (Heb 6:19), those who believe in Christ’s atoning work for them can follow Jesus into the inner sanctuary and abiding in the presence of God is their new reality.

9:13-14 The author of Hebrews further cements this new reality as he compares the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice with the sacrifices made under the Old Covenant. Firstly, in verse 13 he alludes to the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, which O’Brien clarifies was not used on the day of Atonement, but rather as part of the sin offering (Lev 16:14-15 and Numbers 19:4): “the sin offering’s essential purpose was to remove ceremonial defilement only with an external symbolic removal of defilement, not a cleansing of the worshiper’s conscience” (2010:323). This means that the offering was able to prepare worshippers to be included in community worship again, after they were defiled and disqualified from corporate worship. It was an outward sign, which enabled them to worship outwardly, but it was not effective enough to bring inward change or sanctification from sins. Jesus’ blood however, stands in stark contrast. His offering consisted of Himself, His eternal Spirit and His spotless character, not the dead body of an animal, because real reconciliation – not only outwardly with a community but inwardly with God Himself – required a deeper

purification: “it is an inward and spiritual purification that is required if heart communion with God is to be enjoyed” (Bruce 1990: 218). The blood of Christ procures this inward cleansing, and prepares worshippers to not only worship God outwardly, but from inside out, “in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn 4:24): “the cleansing of the conscience leads to a decisive change in a person’s heart with respect to God and enables that person to serve God as He requires” (O’Brien 2010: 326).

b) Christ’s Sacrifice in Comparison to the Blood of the Old Covenant

Hebrews 9:15-28 (NIVUK)

¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

¹⁶ In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, ¹⁷ because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. ¹⁸ This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. ¹⁹ When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. ²⁰ He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ ²¹ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. ²² In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²³ It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

9:15 Christ as the mediator of sinful humanity’s new position before a holy God, a position that wasn’t earned but inherited from the death of the Son. This is the language the author of Hebrew uses in the following verses, as He introduces this idea

of inheritance, covenant and will. Hughes explains the author of Hebrews' play on words: "The word 'covenant' (*diatheke*) which he used twice in verse 15, is also used twice in verses 16-17, where it is translated as 'will'" (1993:235). To this Pfitzner adds, "the Greek word (*diatheke*) can mean both covenant and will, and this allows the author to illustrate a feature of the covenant from the general practice of validating human testaments" (1997:131). In verse fifteen, the author of Hebrews announces that Christ as the Mediator of a new covenant has died and the eternal inheritance He has promised is now ready to be received. His death procured the forgiveness of sins and this eternal inheritance for all people in all ages, that includes those who committed sins under the first covenant, as Hagner clarifies: "The sacrifice of Christ is the answer to sin in every era, past and present, since it alone is the means to forgiveness" (1983:141). There is no other means of inheriting what God has promised, except through the Son, a fact the author of Hebrews effectively illustrates with this legal transaction, easily understood by all.

9:16-17 The point the author of Hebrews introduced in verse fifteen is further unpacked and the bottom line is that a will is put into effect when the testator of that will dies. Only then is what was promised in the will available to be inherited; "the point is that Christ's death activated His incredibly rich will which includes forgiveness, a clear conscience, peace, purpose and eternal life" (Hughes 1993: 235).

9:18-22 The author of Hebrews now switches back to referring to the (*diatheke*) as the covenant and not the will, in order to teach on the necessity of blood which puts the covenant into effect. In verses 19-21 the author of Hebrews describes the events of Exodus 24:3-8 when Moses, after reading the law with its commandments, which would regulate their worship and establish their relationship with God under the Old Covenant, took blood and sprinkled it on the altar and on the people. Pfitzner explains that the author of Hebrews elaborates on the extensive sprinkling described in Hebrews 9:19, since it not only referred to the Exodus 24 incident but also to the details actually included in many rituals stipulated in other places in the book of Exodus: "Additional elements simply add the idea that the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated with comprehensive sprinkling" (1997:131). The reason for this is evident from verse

twenty-two; *“In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”*. Additionally, Lindars points out that, “Hebrews argues on the basis of the legal regulations in Leviticus, because these form the theoretical basis of what is done and accomplished through Christ” (1991:84). The author of Hebrews is stressing the seriousness of sin and the cost of forgiveness. Someone has to die, and by God’s grace, it wasn’t us but Christ who died in our place and secured eternal redemption.

9:23-26 The author of Hebrews further compares the sacrifice of Jesus with the practises listed under Old Covenant, “the author turns to the sacrifice that perfectly cleanses, a sacrifice offered once and for all, that one sacrifice has effectively put away sin” (Morris in Gaebelien 1981: 90). Morris further points out how the author of Hebrews uses the word “sacrifices” in the plural when speaking about the practices under the Old Covenant, so as to stress the fact that it took many sacrifices to purify the earthly elements, in comparison to the one sacrifice made by Christ to bring purification once and for all (1981:91). The author reiterates this truth again as he did in 9:11, that Christ *“entered the heavenly sanctuary not made with human hands”* pointing once again to the fact that the earthly tabernacle was only a copy of the true sanctuary: “Animal sacrifices were temporary measures; the high priests, mortal; the sanctuary, a man-made copy – by contrast, Christ’s once for all sacrifice, permanent; His priesthood, eternal; and the heavenly sanctuary, true” (Kistemaker 1984: 263). The ultimate testimony to the completeness of the work of Christ is the fact that He only had to do it once (v25-26). That one sacrifice was sufficient to change eternity for ever and it will never have to be repeated.

9:27-28 The author of Hebrews transitions from referring to the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice once and for all, to drawing the Hebrew Christians’ attention to the reality of their own mortality: *“man is destined to die once and after that face judgment”*. “The comparative statement shows clearly that Christ’s high-priestly ministry has been fully effective, as death occurs once and is followed by judgment, so Christ’s once-for-all offering is followed by His return to bring salvation to those who eagerly await Him” (O’Brien 2010: 342). The culmination of everything the author of Hebrews

communicated in chapter 9 comes down to this: Christ is coming again, and for those who hold fast to their faith in Him, it will be a joyous occasion of being brought into salvation, inheriting the complete benefit of His covenant and will, eternal life in His ever-lasting Kingdom.

c) Christ's Sacrifice in Comparison to Sacrifices Under the Law

Hebrews 10:1-18 (NIVUK)

10 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. ⁷ Then I said, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God.'" ⁸ First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them' – though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹ Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: ¹⁶ 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.' ¹⁷ Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' ¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

10:1-4 The author of Hebrews grounds his argument as he continues to make a comparison in emphasising the superiority of Christ's sacrifice by calling the law "a shadow" (*skia*) which only points toward the good things to come. Morris in Gaebelin employs a metaphor which have been used by other Bible scholars like Calvin in order to explain the meaning; "the shadow then is the preliminary outline that an artist makes before he gets to painting the portrait; the author is saying that the law is no more than

a preliminary sketch” (1981:95). It’s a simple manner to understand what the author of Hebrews is conveying. The Law to which these Hebrew Christians wanted to return, was no more than a preliminary plan, while Christ was the execution of that plan. He goes on to say that the “shadow” has no power to accomplish what it required; “the old order could never bring those who worshiped under it to a state of perfection, this was plain enough from its annual repetition” (Bruce 1990: 234).

The sacrifices considered are specifically those of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), which was repeated year after year to “perfect those who drew near to worship” (v 1). The goal of the sacrifices was to bring perfection, as Hagner says, “by their nature the sacrifices of the old covenant were unable to bring humanity to the full salvation God intended; the fulfilment depends upon that to which the sacrifices pointed” (1983:152). This leads the author to a question of logic and the answer implied; if the sacrifices of the old covenant were successful, the offerings would have stopped. The reason the sacrifices would no longer have to be offered is that the worshippers consciences would have ceased to accuse them of their guilt. This is only possible if the worshipper’s sins are completely forgiven, to which Kistemaker comments, “the main deficiency of the old covenant was that it could not accomplish forgiveness, the blood of sacrificial animals could not take away sins, only Christ’s blood cleanses consciences and removes sin” (1984:273). The yearly animal sacrifices did serve a purpose however, as it reminded people of their sins and their inability to draw near to God; “annual sacrifices and the application of blood prophetically pointed to the perfect cleansing effected by the blood of Christ” (Pfitzner 1997: 136).

10:5- 7 The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40:6-8 and it becomes clear that the author places Jesus and King David in relation to each other. It is a “typological relationship” as O’Brien states, “the author sees a typological relationship between King David and the great king, Christ” (2010:349). The crux of the message is that God was not pleased with the animal sacrifices and offerings, but had instead “prepared a body” for Christ, through which He would fulfil and satisfy His will. As it was David speaking in the Psalm, to commit himself to obey God’s will, so the author of Hebrews employs Christ as the one committing Himself to obey His Father’s will.

In contrast to the ritualistic sacrifices then, “Christ recognizes His body as the gift God has prepared by the means by which the divine will can be accomplished” (O’Brien 2010:350). Christ willingly laid down His life and offered Himself in order to accomplish His Father’s will, in other words, there was complete submission on Jesus’ part.

10:8-10 The insufficiency of the old sacrificial system, in comparison to God’s acceptance of Christ’s more superior offering is further emphasized. In order to accomplish this, the author of Hebrews employs a chiasmic structure, as Pfitzner explains:

“Choosing verbs with legal connotation, placed in chiasmic order (abolish/first/second/establish) the writer declares a final judgment on the Law’s temporary provisions for multiple repeated sacrifices, and on the finality of Christ’s self-sacrifice” (1997:136).

The sacrifice Christ offered, was once and for all. This is unique to Christianity, since no other religion offers a once and for all salvation, as Morris in Gaebelien points out, “there is no other religion in which one great happening brings salvation through the centuries and through the world, it is a distinctive Christian doctrine” (1981:100). This puts an end to pluralistic arguments that all religions lead to God, since clearly this is not the case. Christianity is unique in this regard. God Himself prepared the body through which all men of all time can be saved.

10:11-13 After the author of Hebrews had made his case for the insufficiency of sacrifices under the Old Covenant, he now goes on to argue the insufficiency of the Old Testament Priesthood’s service in the temple. In comparing their service with that of Christ, the author alludes to the priest’s physical positions. They “stand” daily to offer sacrifices, but Christ after He had finished the sacrifice of Himself is found “seated” at the right hand of God: “standing was the posture appropriate for priestly service, and Aaronic priests never sat during the course of their ministry” (Morris in Gaebelien 1981:100). Bruce agrees and further elaborates on Christ’s position after finishing His priestly work, “Christ then has taken His seat in token that His sacrificial work is finished, but more His position at the right hand of God illustrates the worth of His sacrifice and personal dignity” (1990:246). Jesus now seated high and exalted, will remain there forever until all authorities in heaven and earth are brought under His

reign, a process that has already started and will come to complete fruition upon Christ's return.

10:14-18 Essential to this process of bringing everything under Christ's rule, is the sanctification and transformation of those Jesus came to save through His priestly work. Cardinal Vanhoye maintains that, "such a transformation is only possible through the priestly mediation of Christ, who communicates to believers the purifying renewing power of the Spirit" (2009:224). The author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:33, which refers to the New Covenant promise of God. Under this new promise there will be a complete inward transformation of God's people since His Law will be "written on their minds and hearts". The result is, purification from sin and a guilt-free conscience. This work was accomplished by the finished work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Bruce comments additionally, "far beyond what the sacrificial law of the Old Covenant could provide, under which there was an annual reminder of sin, under the New Covenant there is no more remembrance of them" (1990:248). Perhaps one of the greatest joys of this new position in Christ to which the Spirit testifies is in the thought life of believers, who can now enjoy relationship with Christ without feeling condemned; "sins have effectively been dealt with, and there remains no further place for an offering for sin" (Morris in Gaebelien 1981:102).

3.3.3 Hebrews 13:11-12 (NIVUK)

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

13:11-12 At the end of the book, the author of Hebrews clarifies another way in which Christ fulfilled the old sacrificial system. He refers to the "scapegoat" as stipulated in Leviticus 16;

- First, Aaron made atonement for his own sin and the sin of his family (v6 and 11)
- He then took two goats and presented them before the Lord, one of which was a scapegoat (v8)
- One goat would be offered as a sin offering for Israel's sins (v9) while the scapegoat would be sent into the wilderness

- Aaron would make atonement for the sins of the people, by laying his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of Israel.
- He then sends the goat into the wilderness (20-22)
- After atonement had been made and the scapegoat had been released, the fat and hides were burned outside the camp, the men who helped in the sacrifices were instructed to take off their garments and burn them outside the camp (27-28)

Kistemaker clarifies the necessity of this elaborate cleansing ritual was to point out that sin pollutes, and he further explains how this was an illustration of sin being completely removed from the people. Jesus became the scapegoat, bearing all sin and wickedness as according to the law, “outside the city gate”;

Outside the city gate, Jesus paid for our sins by suffering the agony of hell, through the shedding of His blood, Jesus removed the sin of His people and made them holy by fulfilling the stipulations concerning the removal of sin on the Day of Atonement (1984:421).

3.4 Maturing in Faith

3.4.1 Hebrews 6:4-12;

3.4.2 Hebrews 10:26-39;

3.4.3 Hebrews 12:7-17

3.4.1 Hebrews 6:4-12 (NIVUK)

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ 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. 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. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. 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. ¹⁰ God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

6:4-6 This, one of the most controversial and most argued verses from the book of Hebrews on the subject, “can one lose their salvation?” But as the passage clarifies, the main issue is not salvation, but repentance, the most basic requirement of faith,

as Guthrie clarifies, “the author has identified repentance as a foundational Christian teaching, and according to the author of Hebrews, true repentance can only be experienced in Christ’s sacrifice, no other valid sacrifice for sin is available” (1998: 220). Should one apostate from the faith, they would be turning away from the only available means of repentance, in summary they would be rejecting Christ.

Those who reject Christ, commit themselves as those who publically insulted Jesus as He was being crucified (Matt 27:39-44). Should one of these who subjected Christ to public disgrace come to true repentance and receive Him, they would be saved. However, Guthrie further illustrates, by alluding to the verbs “shared” and “tasted” – (*geusamenous*) taken from (*geuomai*) which means “to experience something”. Thus said, if someone shared in or experienced all the good things offered through Christ, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit, turning back would be impossible (*adynaton*) (1998:221). It is considered a serious sin, but as all sins, this too can be forgiven because of the finished work of Christ, but only if there should be true repentance on behalf of the offender.

6:7-8 The agricultural example evokes an understanding of the manner in which different people receive the message of Christ. Jesus often employed a similar method in deeper spiritual truths as is evident in the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-43). A comparison is made between land that produces a crop (*botanē*) and one that produces weeds and thistles. Both have the same potential, but only one kept toiling and working in order to keep cultivating a good crop. The other land, seems to demonstrate neglect, as thorns and thistles and weeds were not eradicated, but allowed to grow. Eventually the overgrowth became a curse and the only way to cleanse the land would be to set it on fire, as Kistemaker concludes:

The purpose of the author’s illustration is to warn the recipients that merely observing, tasting and experiencing the blessings of God cannot save a person, unless it is “soaked up” and rebirth has taken place. Not the rain alone, but the rain and tilling of the land determine the crop a land produces (1984:99).

Later the author of Hebrews observes, “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is not only required for entry into salvation, but in order to continue growing in our faith, there needs to be a constant toiling in the soil of our

hearts, so that we may be ready to receive God's word. Unless we "maintain our fields" we are in danger of producing crops of weeds and thistles.

6:9-12 The author of Hebrews turns from his stern warning to encouraging the Hebrew Christians. He does not think they will succumb to their suffering circumstances so he has confidence, but the basis of his confidence is not in the Hebrew Christian's faith, but in God. As Morris in Gaebelien points out from verse ten: "a confidence that rests on God's constancy, 'God is not unjust' – it is the character of God, the perfect just judge of all that gives rise to this confidence" (1981: 57). As a final testimony to their faith and maturity, the author further exhorts the Hebrew Christians not to stop persevering in their faith, to continue loving each other, to be diligent and follow the example of those whose faith have proved genuine until the end. O'Brien alludes to the fact that the author of Hebrews is preparing the listeners for his teaching on the generations of believers who have been faithful in chapter eleven: "Later, Christ is explicitly presented as the extreme example of faith (Hebrews 12:1-3), such imitation meant not only listening to what was said but following that person's pattern of life" (2010:233). We can conclude that maturity of faith requires action, in this instance the action of imitating the faith of others who have shown patient perseverance in spite of opposition and in Jesus' case, faithfulness unto death.

3.4.2 Hebrews 10:26-39 (NIVUK)

²⁶ If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. ³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For, 'In just a little while, he who

is coming will come and will not delay.’³⁸ And, ‘But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.’³⁹ But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

10:26-29 The deliberate sin the author is referring to in verse twenty-six is the refusal to draw near to God after He had made the way perfect through Christ: “the sacrifice of Christ confronts the readers with two alternatives: either they will ‘draw near’ to God and commit themselves to the community (10:19-25) or they will sin deliberately after receiving the full knowledge of truth (v26)” (Thompson 2008: 208). The author now alludes to the Old Testament passages in Deuteronomy 27-28 where Israel had the choice to obey God and receive blessings, or in disobedience, receive curses. Verse twenty-seven warns that the rejection of God is to make yourself an enemy of God. An extremely stern warning supported by the continued argument from Israel’s history, where rejection of God had severe consequences (v28). Thompson describes the origin of the texts quoted by the author in this way: “the example is drawn from the rejection of the covenant in Dt 17:2-16, but also includes the phrase ‘without mercy’ from Dt 13:6-10, where punishment of death is prescribed for those who tempt others to idolatry” (2008:209). The warning is thus two-fold, it’s not only against rejecting God’s promise through Christ, but encouraging others to do so which the author of Hebrews strongly condemns. Throughout the book so far the author has established Christ’s superiority and sufficiency as God’s ultimate revelation, to reject Him would be to trample under foot what God has exalted to the highest place, “seated at the right hand of God” (Heb 1:3 & 13; Heb 8:1; Heb 10:12; Heb 12:2). O’Brien states that rejecting “the Spirit of grace” is an outrageous act of arrogance, “it is the gracious Spirit whom the apostate arrogantly insults, the focus is not on the Spirit becoming outraged, but on the sinner’s arrogant behaviour” (2010:380). An offense which will ensure a greater penalty than prescribed in the Law of Moses.

10:30-31 The severity of rejecting Christ is emphasised in these verses. The author of Hebrews ascribes that those guilty of this, will not be judged by the witness of two or three people, but by God Himself. The author once again quotes an Old Testament passage, from Dt 32:35-36 to which Morris in Gaebelien comments, “vengeance is a divine prerogative, it is not for men to take into their own hands, the wrongdoer cannot

escape because avenging wrong is in the hands of none less than God” (1981:108). For those who have accepted Christ as God’s way to salvation, facing God in judgment is not a threat, however, for those who have rejected God’s way of salvation, “to fall into the hands of a mighty God” will indeed be dreadful. The word “dreadful” is translated from *phoberos* which means fearful or frightening.

10:32-34 True to form, the author of Hebrews follows this stern warning with an exhortation as he summarizes all that he’s taught in order to encourage them toward faithfulness: “this passage challenges readers to remain faithful and recalls examples of faithfulness” (Thompson 2008:213). The author praises the Hebrew Christians for their courage when they first came to believe in Christ and acknowledges how they remained faithful through what they have had to suffer in the past. Their suffering included public insults and persecution, or standing with those who were treated so, even to remaining joyful while fellow believers were imprisoned for their faith, or their own possessions confiscated: “the members of the community accepted the seizure of their possessions, not in a stoic fashion or simply in a spirit of equanimity, but joyfully” (O’Brien 2010: 386). The reason for the Hebrew Christian’s courage as identified by the author, was their hope in a lasting inheritance, the promise of a New Kingdom and their eternal inheritance in Christ.

10:35-39 This joyful inheritance forms the basis of the author of Hebrews exhortation. First the author asks the Hebrew Christians to refrain from throwing away their confidence (v35). The word “confidence” translated from (*pharrhēsia*) has been used twice by the author elsewhere, in Hebrews (4:14 and 10:19) – both referring to approaching God’s throne with confidence: “it is the same twofold sense that the word is used here, as ‘steadfastness in adverse circumstances’ that is grounded in the assurance they have of access into God’s presence through Christ and His intercessory ministry” (O’Brien 2010:387). In other words, these Hebrew Christians are secure and confident because they have the assurance of God’s presence no matter what. The Hebrew Christians need to do nothing more than continue to believe in the work of Christ and persevere in it so they may receive what has been promised, as Morris in Gaebelein asserts, “the result in terms of receiving a promise safeguards

any doctrine of salvation by works, God's gift is secure, though not merited, they must continue in their faith till the end" (1981:111). The author quotes Habakkuk 2:3-4 in (v37), which refers to Jesus as "He who is coming, will come and not delay", and "the righteous will live by faith"; "reproducing this clause together with part of its context, emphasizes the forward-looking character of saving faith" (Bruce 1990: 275). The author consistently asks the Hebrew Christians to change their perspective and not to focus on the current persecutions and circumstances, but instead endure them in the face of what they have to look forward to. Something he praised them for doing in the past (verses 34-35), and something he will once again encourage them to do in Hebrews 12:2, when he calls them to "fix their eyes on Jesus". Kistemaker clarifies the clause "if he shrinks back my soul has no pleasure in him": "the quotation from Habakkuk contains a warning to remain true to God, should one shrink back in fear and eventually turn away from his faith, he has forsaken the author of his salvation and God will be displeased with him" (1984:303). The author of Hebrews has faith in the Hebrew Christians, and encourages them by making his confidence known, "we are not those who shrink back but those who have faith and preserve their souls" (v39).

3.4.3 Hebrews 12:7-17 (NIVUK)

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Warning and encouragement

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

12:7-11 The author of Hebrews employs metaphors to make his teaching clear. In these verses however, it is more than just a metaphor, since the Hebrew Christians actually became children of God through Christ as the author already asserted in Hebrews 2:10-17. The focus of his teaching is identified in verse seven namely, “Children” and “Discipline”. Pfitzner points out how the Greek word translated as discipline encapsulates both words. “Discipline” (*paideia*) means to give instruction to a child which must also include reproof” (1997:175). The suffering these Hebrew Christians experienced were difficult, but the author is saying they must heed it as God’s discipline and, like the athletes mentioned in 12:1-4, must be encouraged to be made stronger by these difficulties and trials. The author further encourages the Hebrew Christians by pointing out that they are legitimate children if they undergo discipline. Morris in Gaebelien clarifies this concept: “The word, (*nothos*) “illegitimate” is used of one born of a slave or concubine, they are not considered heirs or members of the family and the father of the household feels no responsibility toward them” (1981:137). This clarifies that the Father only disciplines those He feels responsible for, which is a privilege since He is grooming His heirs to inherit an eternal kingdom. The training produced by God’s discipline and in His perfect wisdom produces a crop of peace and righteousness: “suffering can disrupt, but God’s tested children can know peace (*shalom*) as total wholeness even in the midst of suffering” (Pfitzner 1997:177). The comparison between earthly fathers and our Heavenly Father is clear, our earthly fathers disciplined us as they thought best, though it did not always produce the right results. God’s discipline is perfect, based on the Holy Spirit’s assessment of His children’s needs and therefore it always produces the best results as it leads God’s children to holiness.

12:12-13 In view of the privilege to be considered as children of God and therefore also disciplined by Him as His responsibility, the author calls the Hebrew Christians to strengthen feeble hands and weak knees. The word used for “strengthen” is translated from (*anorthōsate*) which means “to make upright” or “to straighten out”: “The picture is of someone whose hands and legs are for some reason out of action but are put right” (Morris in Gaebelien 1981:139). The imagery implies that the Hebrew Christians need to put things right in their lives and in their hearts. They are to put a ‘cast’ on what has been broken by their suffering and do what they must in order to become strong again, so they can move forward. ‘Hands’ and ‘knees’ can also refer to serving,

and 'knees' to praying and was employed in Isaiah 35:3 when Isaiah was encouraging Judah to renew their faith in God. Similarly, in verse 13 the author quotes Proverbs 4:26: "clearly the idea is to put the paths into better order in order to facilitate travel, specifically for the lame" (Morris in Gaebelin 1981:139). O'Brien clarifies what is meant by "making paths straight" by pointing out that it also basically described what is ethical (2010:471). With this in mind, the exhortation following the text makes sense, since the author is encouraging the Hebrew Christians toward right living and holiness.

12:14-15 The author of Hebrews does not gently coax that the readers should seek peace and holiness, but rather urgently exhorts them to "make every effort": "For the author of Hebrews 'pure' and 'holy' are integrally related, all believers must press on to the consummation of their perfected holiness, which is indispensable for seeing God" (O'Brien 2010:145). This correlates with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God". There is an implication here. For those suffering and considering to turn away from Christ, their focus is not on Jesus. They cannot see Jesus, since their hearts are enticed and led away by other things. The call to lay those things down and recommit purely to Christ will enable the Hebrew Christians so see the Lord once again. The encouragement to look after one another in v15 flows from this and Kistemaker affirms it: "missing the grace of God becomes falling into apostasy, and apostasy is equivalent to serving other gods" (1984:385). In order to assure that these ideas of turning away does not take root among them, the author employs the example from agriculture in order to explain the danger in being "bitter roots" which testify against Christ and representative of their turning away from the Lord: "a person who has missed the grace of God (fallen away) is a bitter root, such a person causes trouble, disturbs the peace of God's people and deprives believers of holiness" (Kistemaker 1984:386).

12:16-17 There's no other image more suited which illustrates temporary relief better than that of sexual immorality. The Hebrew Christians were enticed to abandon their faith in Christ for the temporary relief of not being persecuted. Though abstaining from actual sexual immorality is also called to mind here, the author employs the Old Testament example of an anti-hero of the faith, Esau: "the incident which the author recalls from Esau's example illustrates not fornication but 'profaneness', that is to say, the lack of any sense of spiritual values" (Bruce 1990: 351). The author of Hebrews

is conveying the idea that Esau, as those who give in to their sexual tendencies do not have spiritual matters in mind, but rather earthly matters offering temporary relief. The consequences are listed in verse seventeen; *“Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done”*. In response to this Morris in Gaebelein asserts; “there is a finality about what we do, it is not a question of forgiveness since God’s forgiveness is always open to the penitent, Esau could come back to God, but he could not undo his act” (1981:140). Maturity of faith, means that we keep the eternal matters of God in perspective and do not give in for the temporary relief of earthly pleasures.

3.5 Example of Faith Heroes

3.5.1 Hebrews 11;

3.5.2 Hebrews 12:1-3

3.5.3. Hebrews 13:7-10 & 14-15

3.5.1 Hebrews 11 (NIVUK)

The author of Hebrews is concerned with encouraging the Hebrew Christians who were undergoing terrible trials in their faith. Their circumstances were of such a nature that it would have been materially and physically advantageous to deny Christ and return to Judaism. The author has been encouraging the community throughout the book of Hebrews, but now he lists heroes of faith from their ancestry, which he carefully chose because as Thompson noted, “this recollection of heroes is sandwiched between the challenges endured through suffering in 10:32-39 and 12:1-11, because the heroes faced circumstances similar to those that now confront the community” (2008:228). The author employs a rhythm throughout the passage and faith is the subject. He employs the rhetoric of starting every new example of faith with the phrase, “by faith” (*pistei*) mixed with summary statements about faith in between. We will list the faith heroes, their example of faith and their offered encouragement toward faith for the Hebrew Christians in a table below so as to also identify how their examples are still relevant for exhortation today.

Hebrews 11:1-3 (NIVUK)

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.² This is what the ancients were commended for.³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

11:1-3 The author of Hebrews begins by giving a definition of faith. Morris in Gaebelein comments on the author of Hebrews' definition of faith and says; "the author sees faith as trust in God that enables the believer to press on steadfastly to whatever the future holds for him" (1981:112). Morris and Thompson both agree that the translation of the first sentence have caused some challenge for translators; "faith is the (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for" – the KJV translates the word as "substance" while the NIV translates it as "assurance" while "reality" is another preferred translation.

Bruce introduces another angle and quotes the word as Moulton and Milligan attested it in the Hellenistic papyri: "faith is the *title deed* of things hoped for" (1990:277). This translation brings an understanding, that faith is the certificate on which our promises are written, we don't see the actual object, but we are confident of its existence. The one who hold the title deed of a property owns that property. In the same way, the one who has faith inherits the promises of God. As the author now further demonstrates from the list of faith heroes, faith alters behaviour and moves those who hold it to action. As Morris says, it drives believers to press on steadfastly in spite of circumstances because of the promise the future holds. Verse three introduces the first (*pistei*) 'by faith' declaration as the author includes himself with the Hebrew Christians, "we understand, the earth was formed from nothing", a reality that still exists. Kistemaker makes reference to the challenge of faith this poses as nobody was present when God laid the foundations of the earth: "though we are unable to observe that which is invisible, in our minds we recognize the power of God" (1984:313).

Faith Hero	By Faith (<i>pisteis</i>)	Encouragement toward Faith
Abel Hebrews 11:4 Gen 4:3-5	Abel offered a better sacrifice	His constant faith still speaks as a witness in a sense he has also overcome death, "better blood" sacrifice offered from a righteous heart

		(Kistemaker 1984:316 and Bruce 1990:317)
Enoch Hebrews 11:5 Gen 5:18, 21-24	Never tasted death because he had pleased God, God took him	Enoch walked with God though he could not see Him, he built his life on God (Thompson 2008:233)
Noah Hebrews 11:7 Gen 6-9	Heeded God's warning about unseen events and constructed an ark out of reverent fear	Noah readily accepted God's word and acted upon it
Abraham and Sarah Hebrews 11:8-12 & 17-19 Gen 15, Gen 21, Gen 22	Abraham left his home country to follow God to an unknown promised land Sarah believed God for the conception of a son even though her womb was dead Abraham was willing to offer Isaac because he believed God could raise the dead	Abraham believed God and this meant he obeyed God relentlessly Sarah had faith that God could do the impossible and believed God would do as He promised (Bruce 1990:317)
Isaac Hebrews 11:20 Gen 27	Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau	On each occasion Isaac spoke out of a firm conviction that a blessing given in accordance with God's purposes could not fail (Morris in Gaebelin 1981:124)
Jacob Hebrews 11:21 Gen 49	Blessed each of the sons of Joseph	Illustrates the theme of the patriarchal blessing, God fulfilling His purposes as He pleases and faith in the blessing, though being far of fulfilment (Morris in Gaebelin 1981:124)
Joseph Hebrews 11:22 Gen 50:24-25	"Saw" the Exodus and gave instruction concerning his bones	His faith went beyond death, he believed God would give them what He promised and that their inheritance was assured
Moses Hebrews 11:23-29 Exodus 2; 12; 14	Chose to be counted among God's people and mistreated along with them He left Egypt, kept the Passover and crossed the Red Sea with all the people of God	Considered it greater honour to be counted among God's people than indulging in the fleeting pleasures of Egypt Obeyed God in slaughtering the Passover Lamb in order to be spared

		Saw God's provision and miracles they passed through the Sea Moses trusted God wholeheartedly
People of Israel Hebrews 11:29-30 Exodus 14; Joshua 6	Crossed the Red Sea Marched around Jericho for seven days and saw it fall	Trusting God, the Israelites obeyed God against all logic and saw the fulfilment of their faith
Rahab Hebrews 11:31 Joshua 2; 6:25	Harboured Israelite spies out of reverence for God	Her fear of God led her to reverence and obedience which saved her from perishing with the ungodly
Gideon Barak Samson Jephtah David Samuel Prophets Hebrews 11:32-38 and numerous Old Testament books and passages not specified by author	Triumphant Faith: Conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, closed the mouths of lions, quenched fires, escaped death, were made strong in weakness, put armies to flight, experienced resurrection from the dead Enduring Faith: Mocking, flogging, tortured, chains, imprisonment, stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword, wandered	The author transitions between examples of triumphant faith to enduring faith, (Pfitzner, 1997:168) demonstrating how God had proved faithful and how His people remained faithful in the face of unthinkable circumstances – perhaps some circumstances the Hebrew Christians were also enduring, knowing they followed in the footsteps of great faith heroes would legitimise that they shared in their suffering, but also in their faith

Hebrews 11:39-40 (NIVUK)

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

11:39-40 The author now concludes the parade of faith heroes by stating that all of them were acknowledged for their faith, even though they did not see the promises they hoped for fulfilled in their life times: “they lived and died in prospect of a fulfilment which none of them experienced on earth yet” (Bruce 1990:330). The hope all of these faith heroes possessed moved them to endure, to press on and to continue powerfully

despite discouraging circumstances. God was not being slow or unfaithful in fulfilling His promises toward the faithful, but as verse forty clarifies, “*since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect*”. This “perfection” (*teleiōs*) God has attained through the work of Christ, as O’Brien attests, “according to Hebrews 10:4 the perfecting of believers is the definitive clearing of their consciences from sins enabling them to draw near to God and enjoy a covenant relationship with Him” (2010:447). The ultimate fulfillment of all God’s promises in Christ, which all believers in the past, present and future are looking forward to and experiencing partially, is a restored and continual intimate relationship with God and inheritance of an eternal kingdom which will be completely consummated at the return of Jesus.

3.5.2 Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIVUK)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

12:1 The author employs the metaphor of a race. Though the famous Coliseum was only built in Rome after the rule of Emperor Nero in 69-80 AD as work on it started by Emperor Vespasian was completed by Titus (Rodgers 2012: 56), a culture of games and sport were firmly embedded in this Roman society. Masses of crowds gathered to spectate gladiatorial combats, athletics, chariot races and the lot. It is in this atmosphere the author sets his listeners as he drives the climax of his message home. Morris in Gaebelin comments on the “cloud (*nephos*) of witnesses” as the author of Hebrews calls them and says, “from time to time this word was used to describe a great throng of people, it emphasizes number, the witnesses are a vast host” (1981:133). The idea is portrayed that this great crowd of people, perhaps other athletes who have finished their races, are standing and cheering on those who are still in the race. The athletes themselves however must train and follow disciplined routines in order to get stronger and so perform at their best. For earthly athletes this means exercise routines, eating healthy and practising their skills so that they might cancel out anything which might inhibit them. For these Christians, the author is using

this as a metaphor in dealing with sin in the lives of believers, “sin that so easily entangles’ (*euperistatos*) means “well”, “around” and “standing” and bears the meaning of “easily surrounding” or “easily entangling”” (Morris in Gaebelin 1981:134). To this definition of the word, Bruce adds that the author of Hebrews is not referring to one specific sin, but rather to sin itself as something entangling the athlete’s feet and tripping them up before they could even take one step forward (1990:336). In modern terms, the image comes to mind of an athlete trying to run with his shoelaces tied together. The author of Hebrews is telling the Christians to be rid of sin, since it has the potential to hinder and distract them from running toward their goal, Jesus.

12:2 The metaphor continues as the athletes still competing in the race are told to focus their attention on the goal of their faith, and that goal is Jesus. Jesus is identified as the “author and perfecter” which holds the idea that Jesus began their faith and He also saw it through into completion as clarified by different translations of the passage, for example the Amplified Classical Bible translates; “*Jesus, who is the Leader and the Source of our faith (giving the first incentive to our belief) and is also its Finisher (bringing it to maturity and perfection)*”. O’Brien refers to the use of Jesus’ name instead of His identification as Christ and points out that the use of Jesus name emphasizes His humanity: “particularly His endurance of pain, humiliation and the disgrace of the cross” (2010:453). He goes on to say that the verb rendered “fixing your eyes on Jesus” is used in the English language as “look to” which not only means focus, but also alludes to asking for help or relying on someone, it’s like drawing on them for a source of strength and motivation. The kind of strength and motivation Jesus offers is the fact that He “endured the cross” for the sake of “the joy set before Him” – as Morris in Gaebelin says, “Jesus looked right through the Cross to the coming joy of bringing salvation to those He loves, Jesus thought so little of the pain and shame involved that He did not bother to avoid it” (1981:134). The next phrase echoes the completion of Jesus’ work after He had endured the suffering, it had permanent and lasting effects as eternity had been set, “He sat down at the right hand of God” (v2b).

12:3 In view of all of this, the author now encourages the Hebrew Christians to follow the example of Jesus as they also endure opposition. Their endurance, made possible

by Jesus, means they can continue in faith and power He will supply that they may endure and not lose heart. Pfitzner pictures the image that emerges:

Believers who consider Christ by fixing their attention on Him will not grow weary when they meet with their opposition; to “not lose heart” belongs to the athletic image which involves antagonists who stand in the runner’s path and whom one must come to grips with like a wrestler or boxer (1997:174)

This verse thus communicates perseverance in the face of opposition, like a boxer taking on their opponent head on as they continue to fight and endure.

3.5.3 Hebrews 13:7-10 & 14-15 (NIVUK)

⁷Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. ⁹Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. ¹⁰We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

13:7 The author of Hebrews further encourages the Christians toward faith as he turns the focus towards their leaders and teachers in this last chapter. As established in the previous Chapters of our thesis, some of these leaders who first spoke the word of God to the Hebrew Christians in Rome, may have included Paul, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquilla, Barnabas and Apollo. All of these worthy faith examples to follow and imitate. Thompson emphasizes that the manner in which these leaders taught them was through “the spoken word of God” a recurring theme scattered throughout the book of Hebrews as Christians are called to hear, listen and not harden their hearts toward the Word of God which is sharper than a double edged sword (Hebrews 2:3; 4:2; 4:12) (2008:280).

13:8 Leaders may come and go, or even pass on to heaven, but the author of Hebrews now comforts the Christians with the words “*Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever*”; “as the author has insisted throughout the homily, the marginalized community finds its only stability in the unseen and eternal reality that does not change” (Thompson 2008:281). Jesus is their anchor, and no amount of suffering or even death can separate the Hebrew Christians from Him. Morris in Gaebelien insists on the constancy of Jesus’ unchanging character as this is a further encouragement

to the Christians that Jesus Christ Himself will not change in personality or purpose, but that the same Jesus Christ who was “yesterday” (*echtes*) meaning, in His pre-existence and pre-incarnate form, is the same Christ they will meet face to face and spend eternity with (1981:148).

13:9-10 A contrast is illustrated by the author between the appearance of outward righteousness taught by Judaism through performing rituals and eating ceremonial foods, and the inward righteousness which the Hebrew Christian’s gained through their faith and by the grace of Jesus. The emphasis is, that nothing else except their faith in Jesus is needed for salvation and the Hebrew Christians should not listen to any teaching which suggests otherwise; “the rationale of this warning against strange and varied teachings is that it is pleasing in God’s sight for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, and to draw near to God in full assurance of faith with a ‘true heart’ – a biblical expression of sincerity and loyalty” (O’Brien 2010:518). The author of Hebrews strengthens his argument by alluding to the altar where the Jewish priests (the Hebrew Christians’ previous leaders) are still serving at since the temple had not been destroyed yet. The fact that they are still serving or ministering at the altar in the temple, means that they have not accepted Christ’s sacrifice for them and Morris in Gaebelien explains its significance: “Those who worship in the tent (Jewish worshipers in general), have as such no rights to the altar of the cross, the crucified Saviour means nothing to them” (1981:150). Since the crucified Christ means nothing to them, they can have no part of Him. The author of Hebrews is essentially warning the Christians that they must not side with the Jewish leaders since they understand and have accepted what Christ has done for them. Their focus should steady on Jesus.

Hebrews 13:14-15 (NIVUK)

¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

13:14-15 The Hebrew Christians were facing the loss of their possessions, they had lived through the expulsion from the Rome, having lost their place in society and their homes. They had no place to really call home and perhaps holding on to their Judaism

gave them a sense of still belonging somewhere. The author now encourages them with the words that their inheritance is not a city that will perish, like Rome or Jerusalem, but they have an eternal inheritance to look forward to, one that will never perish but endure forever. Bruce contends that the author of Hebrews is drawing their attention back to what he previously told them in Hebrews 11:10 and 12:27: “they would be gainers as they would be leaving a “city” which was doomed to pass away for a “city which has true foundations of which God is the architect and builder”” (1990:382). Like their faith hero Abraham, the author is encouraging these Christians to go out and to persevere in their faith trusting God and believing Him for the inheritance they can be sure to expect in the future. With this in mind, the author of Hebrews calls the Christians to “*offer sacrifices of praise – the fruit of lips that continue to profess His Name*” – Hagner points out that there are sacrifices that are still acceptable and pleasing to God and it is defined as “the fruit of the lips that profess His Name” calling the Hebrew Christians to remain faithful to their confession of Jesus (1997:244).

3.6 Encouraging Faith and Endurance in Christ

3.6.1 Hebrews 2:1-4;

3.6.2 Hebrews 12:18-28

3.6.1 Hebrews 2:1-4 (NIVUK)

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ²For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

2:1 As the author of Hebrews calls the Christians to heed the word brought through the Son who is greater than the angels, he uses a nautical image with the word “drift away” (*pararyōmen*). Lane explains it this way: “the image of a drifting ship, carried off by the current beyond a fixed point, furnished the vivid metaphor for the failure to keep a firm grip on the truth through carelessness and lack of concern” (1991:37). After a strong argument for Jesus as the final revelation of God’s message in Hebrews chapter one and His authority over the heavenly beings, it would be careless to drift

away from the truth revealed through Christ. The author is calling the Hebrew Christians to be diligent and have concern for remaining anchored to the truth they have come to believe.

2:2-4 The gravity of drifting away is emphasized by the author of Hebrews as he employs judicial language in communicating how disastrous an offense it would be. Both Lane and Morris in Gaebelin agree for the Old Testament's lack of mentioning the part the angels played at Mt Sinai, but points out that there are New Testament texts (Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19) which indicate that they were present at the giving of the Law (1981:21; 1991: 37). The argument is not whether or not the angels were present, but that heaven stands as a witness to the divine message brought to the Hebrew Christians and a trespass against this message has eternal consequences: "This provided a sobering reality for those who were prone to be apathetic or unresponsive to God's revelation in the Son" (Lane 1991:38).

The author affirms, "*there is no escape if we ignore such a great salvation*" and in verses 3-4 points out three things that makes this salvation so much greater, as Morris in Gaebelin and Hughes both agree, this salvation is great firstly because of the manner it was announced, second in the manner it was confirmed and thirdly it was affirmed by God;

Jesus announced it, as the incarnate Son it makes His communication infinitely superior to the angels. It was confirmed by those who heard it, this primarily refers to the apostles attesting what Jesus said and passing it along from faith to faith through the succeeding generation. Lastly it was affirmed by the Holy Spirit, the testimony was dynamic through signs and miracles which pointed beyond the human hand to the hand of God (Hughes 1993:51).

The author of Hebrews includes all three Persons of the Trinity as God the Father gave the Law which has now been put into full effect as fulfilled and communicated by the Son and affirmed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God's will have been completely affirmed. It would be a great offense to ignore such a great salvation.

3.6.2 Hebrews 12:18-28 (NIVUK)

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken

to them,²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.'²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.'²⁷ The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

12:18-21 In the author's description of the events at Mount Sinai, he emphasises the terror and the unapproachability of God displayed by the terrifying sight and strict prohibitions that was set during God's manifestation at the giving of the Law to Moses. The author combines accounts from Exodus 19:12-19 and Dt 4:11 & 5:22-25 where God's presence was tangible, visible and audible (12:18-19). The terror was reinforced by the restrictions from Exodus 19:13, which called for any living thing that crossed the boundary set around the mountain, to be put to death immediately. The Israelites were so terrified, that they pleaded with Moses to speak with God on their behalf (Exodus 20:19): "According to our author even Moses was filled with fear at the spectacle of the theophany at Sinai, the picture of giving the law at Sinai, then, is one in which fear and the sternness of God's commands predominate" (Hagner 1983:225). The author successfully accentuates the unapproachability of God under the Law, by recalling how it used to be ruled by terror. He now reminds the Hebrew Christians of their redeemed state in the following verses under the New Covenant. Should the Hebrew Christians return to Judaism, what used to be reality under the Law will once again become their reality.

12:22-24 In stark contrast to the terror of Mount Sinai, the author now expounds on the glory of Mount Zion. The author once again visualises a gathering, but instead of it being a gathering of terrified Israelites, it is rather a festive gathering a "joyful assembly" with thousands upon ten thousands (*myriads*) of angels in attendance

(12:22) along with “the church of the firstborn” (12:23) referring to the gathering of all Christians on earth and in heaven who have been brought to the end for which they were made as Morris in Gaebelein states (1981:143). The place they gather is physically a hill on which Jerusalem was built, but as Morris further clarifies, “it’s mention here specifically stands for the city as the home of God’s people” (1981:143). The people without a place to call home as they were being persecuted from Jerusalem and currently in Rome, had a home to look forward to where God would dwell with them and they would finally be at home. No longer would they have to stand at a distance, unable to approach God, but they would be counted among the sacred and holy to God since they have access to God the Judge of all, and have been made perfect (12:23b). The ultimate climax of this new position is brought about in verse twenty-four, “*to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*”. The Hebrew Christians have been brought to Christ whose promise and sacrifice was better and bore better implications for those under it as Bruce expounds: “Abel’s blood cried out to God protesting against murder and appealing for vindication, but the blood of Christ brings a message of cleansing, forgiveness, and peace with God to all who place their faith in Him” (1990:361).

12:25-28 The author of Hebrews concludes this section of his homily with a final warning and exhortation. The kingdom they stand to inherit requires them to persevere in their faith. He warns them, “do not refuse the one who is speaking” (*mē paraitēsēsthe*) to which Thompson refers when he says, “if God’s word at Sinai was a severe word of warning, God’s ultimate word is even more severe, rejecting the ultimate voice has ultimate consequences for the listeners” (2008:268). Further emphasising the consequences, the author contrast heaven and earth as he refers to God’s voice shaking the earth and the heavens, a phrase familiar to Haggai 2:6 “where the prophet looked forward to something grander than Sinai, when God’s voice shook the earth, Haggai foresaw a time when God would not only shake the earth but the heavens also” (Morris in Gabelein 1981:144). The implications of God’s voice shaking the heavens, perhaps refer to that time when Christ’s sacrifice was made and the cosmic order was forever changed, as Morris says, “it was that time when God had made a decisive intervention” (1981:144). An intervention that will once again be

made when Jesus returns to bring salvation to perfection for all those who are eagerly waiting for Him (Hebrews 9:28).

This is how the author of Hebrews then finalizes his stern warning followed by a word of exhortation, he announces to the Christians that their inheritance is an unshakeable kingdom. O'Brien formulates it this way: "the description of Zion is understood as pointing to the eschatological kingdom, all the images used in this passage locates the believers within this kingdom they received through Christ where they are recipients of God's culmination of promises" (2010:499). The culmination of God's promises is unshakeable, and therefore the author now calls the Hebrew Christians to, "worship God acceptably (*euarestōs*) with sacrifices that are acceptable (*eueresteitai*) – this refers to them being made righteous because of Christ's sacrifice which now enables them to live lives of express devotion to God" (O'Brien 2010:500). The Hebrew Christians have lost a lot through persecution, vandals and repossession of their properties and possessions, but all these are earthly things belonging to a shakeable kingdom. The exhortation to live for a kingdom that is unshakeable is attractive, and calls the focus away from what they have lost for the sake of Christ, toward what they have hope for and gain in Christ.

CHAPTER 4

Apply these textual results to encourage youth in keeping their Christian faith

Our research question: “How can a narrative-based Bible Study in Hebrews be used to encourage young people to keep their faith in the midst of post-religious persecution?” has been explored in its original intent and meaning of the relevant texts in Chapter 3. We will now apply these texts as it still pertains to encouraging faith in Christ today. We will do this in two parts. Under the headings of 4:1 we will see how these texts applied to exhorting the original audience. While the headings under 4:2 will interpret how these texts encourage modern day youth to keep their Christian faith.

Our aim is to bridge the gap between the ancient world of the Hebrew Christians with the modern world of today’s youth. This is no small feat, since the differences are vast. The human condition however, and our need for a Saviour, remains unchanged throughout all centuries. Moreover, Jesus Christ remains the same as Hebrews 13:8 states; “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever”. Though the times and challenges may have changed, the truth revealed through Jesus and the power of His work is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. Most importantly, the Person approached by the Hebrew Christians, is the same Jesus Christ we approach today.

4.1 Exploring how these passages encouraged the original audience in keeping their faith

4.1.1. The Superiority of Christ

(Hebrews 1:1-4; Hebrews 1:5-14; Hebrews 3:1-6; Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Hebrews 7)

In all of these passages, the author of Hebrews writes against the background of the Old Testament. He employs the Old Testament in a synchronic approach, since this is what the Jewish Christians knew, it was their heritage, part of their culture and where their stories were formed. They understood and participated in its uses, it was taught and told over to them as children. In the opening verses Hebrews 1:1-4, the author has already laid a complete foundation for the superiority of Christ’s Person, Work and Status over what the Hebrew Christians have learned and understood from Judaism.

In Chapter three of our Masters, we concluded that the Hebrew Christians did not need to be taught a theology of God, since they already had an understanding of who He was as He revealed Himself throughout Old Testament Scriptures. The people of God were still the same, as Guthrie points out, “the moral needs and obligations of the people under both covenants remain the same, forming the core bases for the ethical use of the Old Testament in Hebrews; our God is the same God and we struggle with sin as did our Old Testament counterparts” (1998:87).

These Jewish Christians knew God spoke, and He did so through the prophets, He also spoke through the angels who intervened and brought messages to the prophets. They knew that when the LORD heard the cries of their ancestors while in slavery in Egypt, He raised up Moses who acted on His behalf to set them free. In view of this, “the audience’s admiration for Moses assures the rhetorical impact of demonstrating Jesus’ greater status” (Guthrie, 1998:131). Following the exodus, they knew the LORD gave Moses the pattern for continued relationship with Him and instated the priesthood, the Law and the sacrifices.

All of these agents acted as mediators between God and His people. Imagine how these Hebrew Christians must have been tested in their local synagogues? Trying to defend Jesus as the Messiah while educated rabbis and scribes were arguing against Jesus as the Christ. These arguments may have included the fact that Jesus was of the tribe of Judah and not of Levi, so how could He be a mediating priest? In answer, to which our author refers to an even more ancient priestly figure in Melchizedek, who was an example of the type of priesthood of Jesus (Hebrews 7). Guthrie explains the typological interpretation the Author of Hebrews applies: “for Hebrews, the priest Melchizedek foreshadows the heavenly high priest, Christ as he interprets Gen 14:17-20 in the light of what Psalm 110:4 declares” (1998:256).

The Author of Hebrews clearly sets out to lift the veil from the eyes of the Hebrew Christians pointing out the superiority of Christ over all counter-arguments and beliefs. He does so by simply teaching the Hebrew Christians through this homiletic letter and in the process of enriching them with knowledge, as well as simultaneously building

up their faith in Christ. We will employ a similar approach when teaching modern youth today from the book of Hebrews.

4.1.2. The Superiority of Faith

(Hebrews 3:7-4:12; Hebrews 5:11-6:11; Hebrews 6:13-20)

The Author of Hebrews is teaching his listeners by referring back to their ancestors and the example of their faithlessness in the midst of God's faithfulness. The Israelites' lack of faith disqualified an entire generation from seeing the promises of God fulfilled. After wandering the desert for forty years all but Joshua and Caleb, whose faith saved them, died disappointed in the wilderness. Hughes states the tragedy of this: "It all began so well, but ended so poorly, only two over the age of twenty ever got to enter the Promised Land and that was forty years later – the grand and tragic lesson of Israel's history is that it is possible to begin well and end poorly" (1993: 98).

The author of Hebrews shares this caution (Heb3:7-4:12) – The Jewish Christians started well, received the message of Christ with so much hope, but now that they were being persecuted, they were starting to lose that hope and their faith was dwindling. In response the author uses the opportunity to instruct the Hebrew Christians on remaining faithful, by using the positive example of Christ against the negative example of their ancestors. Guthrie, on the structure of Hebrews 3:1-19, states emphatically: "This passage presents two units, one focusing on the faithfulness of Jesus (Hebrews 3:1-6), and the other on the negative example of the desert wanderers, both cohere around the theme of faithfulness" (1998:137).

The message is clear. The author of Hebrews was using the example of their ancestors and how Joshua and Caleb, were the only two of an entire generation who possessed faith to inherit what was promised. The promise for faithful believers is rest. This is not a rest that depended on the world and its circumstances, but on God and His promises fulfilled through Christ. It was rest, because God's purposes would be fulfilled, no matter how dire their earthly circumstances were, or how many odds

counted against them. The author of Hebrews was encouraging these Hebrew Christians to take hold of the same faith as Joshua and Caleb, (*pistis*) faith which is wholehearted trust in God.

At the same time, the author was instructing them on taking hold of the rest they possess through Christ. This would require both faith and obedience. Guthrie concludes, “the entering of the rest by God’s people, therefore, involves obedience (4:11) and faith (4:1-3), two concepts closely aligned in the author’s thought (3:18-19) which constitute the ceasing of our own efforts and counsel and embracing God’s will” (1998:160). Joshua and Caleb possessed this faith, because they embraced God’s will. Even when the task God was appointing them seemed impossible; they had faith that God would fulfil His promises and His will would be done, regardless of how weak or afraid they felt.

In Hebrews 5:11-6:12: The author’s main concern for the Hebrew Christians, was that their immaturity of faith was leading them down a slippery slope towards apostasy. Their focus on arguing the “basic elements” of the faith was taking their focus off growing in their confession of Jesus as Messiah. Furthermore, these elementary arguments of the faith were “dulling their minds” and stunting their growth. More than that, the author is warning the Hebrew Christians of the awful sin of not believing God and the fulfilment of His promises through Christ. Rejecting Christ meant becoming unbelievers, “in the Jewish literature of the day, repentance was a gift from God, and Hebrews has taken that thought as specifically incarnated in the Person of Jesus Christ. Repentance in 6:4-6 becomes “impossible” because there is nowhere else to go to repent once one has rejected Christ” (Guthrie, 1998:220).

In view of these stern warnings against apostasy, the author of Hebrews encourages trust in God. The author implores the example of their ancestor Abraham’s faithfulness in Hebrews 6:13-20: “who consequently stayed the course of sacrifice through intense, prolonged testing and became a paradigmatic receptor of God’s covenant promise” (Guthrie, 1998:241).

The entire argument is then cemented in these two facts, 1) God had made the promise and His Word can be trusted and 2) the promise is confirmed by being anchored through Christ to the throne of God and therefore has thorough and eternal implications. The outcome of such a trustworthy promise for the Hebrew Christians is hope. *“Hope that anchors the soul”* (6:19) is a beautiful illustration the author employs to portray the internal peace and steadfastness the Hebrew Christians can experience in the midst of the stormy waters of their outward circumstances. All they have to do is put their faith in Christ.

4.1.3 The Superiority of Christ’s Sacrifice

(Hebrews 2:5-18; Hebrews 9:1-10: 18; Hebrews 13:11-12)

The author of Hebrews retells the entire redemptive story in Hebrews 2:15-18. Calling the Hebrew Christian’s attention toward Jesus as their Saviour and hero. Thompson argues that this method was prevalent in Greek and Gnostic thought as there were many myths depicting cosmic dramas at the time:

The author’s depiction of the cosmic drama evokes images that ancient readers would associate with a common mythological plot in which the hero descends to the underworld to defeat the power of death and bring captives back to life – the oldest tradition that has preserved of Heracles, associates him with the conquest of Death (2008:65)

The author of Hebrews is therefore retelling the story of Christ to his readers in a manner they could relate to and perhaps have never heard before. He also introduces Jesus’ ministry as High Priest for the first time and His consequent work and sacrifice to overcome death and the power of Satan. It is the story of Jesus’ sacrifice which ultimately cost Him His exalted position in heaven, which he exchanged for a lowly human form. He suffered and died bringing salvation to those who believed in Him. Not only did Jesus save humanity, He also exalted them to the position as sons and daughters of God and presents them, holy and redeemed before the Father in heaven. In the midst of the Hebrew Christians’ suffering, the author successfully turns their focus away from their own suffering, and towards their Saviour who have suffered everything they were experiencing and was able to sympathize with them.

In Hebrews 9:1-10:18 the need for atonement was set out in the Law of God in the Old Testament. When God gave the instructions for worship to Moses as recorded in Exodus 25-30, He specified in Exodus 25:40 “*Be sure to make everything just like the pattern I showed you on the mountain*”. The reason for this, was because the earthly tabernacle was a representation of the heavenly throne room. A place no human could enter since their sin and guilt had caused eternal separation from their holy God. The only way people could approach was through bringing sacrifices as stipulated in the Law given to Moses under the Old Covenant. These sacrifices pointed toward the ultimate and greater sacrifice which would one day recover a sinful humanity’s relationship with their holy God, forever. John Owen points out that it is Jesus, who ultimately subjected Himself on our behalf and fulfilled the sacrificial requirement:

God required that the penalty due and threatened to sin should be undergone and suffered. The Son willingly undertook – being an instance of obedience in compliance with the will and law of God, outbalancing the disobedience of the first, and all our sins in opposition to this, he offered up Himself as sacrifice and in the end was called, anointed, ordained of God a high priest (2010:201)

The competence of Christ’s sacrifice as communicated by the author of Hebrews is comprehensive. Every detail is incorporated as evident in the inclusion of the teaching on the scapegoat in Hebrews 13:11-12, in order to prove the sufficiency of what Christ has done on the believer’s behalf. No counter argument made by the temple priests or teachers of the law went unanswered when the Author of Hebrews considered and taught on the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice.

4.1.4 Maturing in Faith

(Hebrews 6:4-12; Hebrews 10:26-39; Hebrews 12:7-17)

The Author of Hebrews employs the rhetoric of exposition reinforced by exhortation and sustains this pattern throughout the entire book. He is teaching, warning and encouraging the Hebrew believers against apostasy. At the most basic point, these warnings and instructions are implemented throughout the book in order to encourage the Hebrew Christians, not to turn their backs on Christ. Moreover, the author encourages them to continue to grow and mature in their faith. Drawing from metaphors and images of infants to athletes, and from crops that produce a harvest, to fathers disciplining their children. The author makes his point vividly and powerfully.

In Hebrews 6:4-12 the author contests the Hebrew Christian's tendency to turn back to Judaism in order to avoid persecution with a strong reprimand and warning. Turning away from Jesus, would mean they have rejected their only means to salvation through true repentance. Would it be possible for them to lose their salvation? Sam Storms in his book "Tough Topics" questions whether those who were turning away were truly saved in the first place. It is possible, to have "tasted" (*geusamenous*) – taken from (*geuomai*) and which means "to experience something" – but not truly repented. The evidence from Jesus' own ministry while on earth, demonstrates in Matt 7:22-23 how many partook of the Kingdom realities, exorcising demons, healing the sick and even performing miracles in the name of Christ, but not actually belonging to Jesus. To which Storms says, "These then, "have tasted" the power blessings of the new covenant but they have not personally prized, cherished, embraced, loved, trusted or treasured the atoning death of Jesus as their only hope for eternal life" (2013:214).

The Hebrew Christians are instructed to keep cultivating the soil of their hearts. In doing so they may be the kind of followers who produce a harvest of righteousness, who embrace, cherish, love and treasure Christ. This is how they might continue to acknowledge Him as the only means to true repentance and ultimate salvation. The author exhorts these Christians by turning their focus away from their circumstances, and towards loving Jesus wholeheartedly. A love that is not stagnant but will develop and grow stronger over time (and in all seasons of life).

In Hebrews 10:26-39 the author gives a passionately stern warning, against the Hebrew Christian's tendency to "neglect meeting together" (Hebrews 10:25). Even more than abandoning the assembly, he means to warn them from completely turning away from the faith and back to Judaism, with the hope that it will afford them less persecution. The entire argument up to this point has been exposition and exhortation toward the superiority of Christ over the old order. The ultimate reality of what it availed to Christians is that they are now able to approach God in the full assurance of faith. Through Christ's offered body, they have been made holy for God's presence. Their sins atoned for, cleansed from an evil conscience and their bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

To reject Christ in view of this reality is absurd, hence the author's strong argument against it. Storms affirms the seriousness of rejecting the person and work of Christ, "someone who has experienced that awesome opportunity and privilege and then wilfully repudiates Jesus' work and Person through whom it was made possible can expect judgment" (2013:218).

In Hebrews 10:39 the author only envisions two groups, those who do not possess true saving faith and therefore shrink back, and those who do possess saving faith, and persevere. The challenge then to the Hebrew Christians remains, "which group do you belong to?"

Those who truly believe, are not merely servants but children as the author continues in Hebrews 12:7-17. In the Greco-Roman context of the Hebrew Christians; having a father to discipline you was an honour, since the father's responsibility was to train his son. As Guthrie notes: "the father's responsibility was to train the child in such a way that he was well prepared for adulthood and this training often involved correction and punishment, but the ultimate goal was to help the child develop character and wisdom" (1998:407). This powerful illustration encourages maturity, as hardships can be endured in view of a larger picture which benefits the Hebrew Christians as children of God.

4.1.5 Example of the Faith Heroes

The Hebrew Christians possessed a rich heritage of great faith heroes to look up to as the author sets forth to establish in chapter eleven. Though these "heroes of the faith" demonstrated exemplary faith, the greater encouragement from their lives were that they were quite ordinary. They became extraordinary when they believed God and trusted Him to remain faithful in what He promised them. "Faith must be expressed by real people" as Guthrie states, "they are pilgrims who have not yet reached the heavenly city, they are searching, they haven't arrived, they are heroes, not because they are perfect but because they worked with God in His perfect work" (1998:389).

It is the humanity of these people that can encourage such great faith. It proves that weaknesses, shortcomings, circumstances, sin or suffering doesn't disqualify anyone from living a life of faith. The only requirement is that they should trust God, and this is what the author of Hebrews teaches them.

These "heroes" faith were not passive or stagnant. Rather, as Guthrie further points out, each of these "heroes" were moved into action. The author's list of verbs testify to this in verses 32-34, "they conquered, administered, gained, shut, quenched, escaped, became powerful and routed" (1998:388). What is also evident from the exemplary faith these "heroes" possessed was that it did not mean they did not suffer.

They were still persecuted, as the author of Hebrews points out in verses 35-38. Some of the suffering these "heroes" endured included, mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment, stoning and being sawn in two and killed. They were destitute, afflicted, mistreated, wandering and hiding in caves, mountains and dens. The author knew these Hebrew Christians were experiencing persecution similar to what the "heroes of the faith" were, and he used it as catapult to encourage them toward action, faith and endurance. In doing so they would also be considered as heroes who remain faithful, in the face of great opposition to their faith.

With this marvellous list of heroic faith coming to an end, the author now identifies the ultimate hero of the faith (Hebrews 12:1-3) whose example the believers should follow; and that is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. All of these heroes, and especially Jesus had endured great suffering, hardships and persecution. Yet, they remained faithful. Now as Hagner agrees: "Christians of every era are called to walk in the steps of faith characterized by the saints of the past and the one who has now been made Lord. For only such an attitude of faith can sustain them during the adversities they may be called to face" (1983: 211).

4.1.6 Endurance

(Hebrews 2:1-4; Hebrews 12:18-28)

The Author of Hebrews in chapter 2:1-4 employs a nautical theme to affirm the gravity of drifting away from the revelation brought through Jesus Christ. To reject Him would

be like drifting away into the deep sea, where there are horizons of nothing, only stormy seas and serious judgment by God. Guthrie affirms the negative result of ignoring salvation: "Some of the Christians the author addresses were living on the edge of the community, slowly slipping away from a firm commitment to the message of salvation" (1998:88). He goes on to say that many of these Christians were drifting away because of persecution and becoming obscured from the message of Christ and the fellowship of the believers. These Christians are being called back to obedience and commitment to their fellow Christians and to the message of salvation through Christ.

After the stern warning, the author provides encouraging evidence that the message of Christ remains true and stable. Since it is announced by Jesus Himself, affirmed by the angels, by the apostles who testified to the Hebrew Christians, by God the Father and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the signs and wonders which followed. "The author considers these historical events and testimonies as validating this message as a stabilizing factor in the Christian life validating their Christian belief and includes them in the history God Himself is writing" (Guthrie:1998:89). To reject and drift away from such a salvation would be preposterous.

As the author of Hebrews comes to the end of his homily in Hebrews 12:18-28, he ultimately encourages the Hebrew Christians toward endurance. He compares the difference between their approach to God in the past, which had passed away under the old Law and approaching God in the Kingdom brought in through Christ, which is now their reality. The greatest difference brought in through the ministry of Christ is evident in the manner believers can approach God. There is freedom instead of fear, forgiveness instead of wrath. The two mountains described by the Hebrew author in chapter twelve illustrates this.

The comparison consists of the description of two mountains which holds great significance for Israel. Mount Sinai being the place where the Law was received by Moses and Mount Zion a place of hope for a future expectation. As Thompson explains: "Mount Zion was the place where Israel's ultimate hopes would become realized, the return of God's people to Zion symbolizes the return of the world to God

and the establishment of a new covenant and the worship of a restored community” (2008:261).

It looks forward to the time when God would take His place among His people. “*He would be their God and they would be His people*” (Ex 29:45; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezekiel 37:27; Rev 21:7). The Author of Hebrews therefore once again refocuses the Christian’s attention away from their present sufferings and toward the expectation of the promise and hope they held because of their faith in Christ. Great endurance would be required. The reward however, is so much greater than anything they may have to endure.

4.2 Applying how these passages still encourage youth today in keeping their faith

4.2.1. The Superiority of Christ

(Hebrews 1:1-4; Hebrews 1:5-14; Hebrews 3:1-6; Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Hebrews 7)

All of the examples the author of Hebrews used were applicable to the Jewish Christian audience since it was part of who they were. Now we want to contend how it could be relevant to us – and specifically for the purpose of our studies – relevant to young people living two millennia later. How may the book of Hebrews encourage a young generation to accept the superiority of Jesus so they would be encouraged towards faith in Him?

In response we have concluded the following: though the times and circumstances of modern Christians (especially young people) are undeniably different from those of the Hebrew Christians over two thousand years ago, the necessity for a mediator between a holy God and sinful humanity has not changed. God answered that need through His Son, Jesus who has become our eternal mediator through His life, death, resurrection and ascension to the Majesty in heaven. No other mediator is necessary and no other mediator is sufficient.

Jesus in these passages in Hebrews is not only central, but exalted as supreme to all other alternatives or previous mediators. Ross in his book, "The Supremacy of Christ", defines the difference between keeping Christ central and exalting Him as supreme in this way: "centrality calls believers to let their lives be *wrapped up around* who Jesus is, supremacy requires that their lives be *wrapped up into* who Jesus is" (2009:15).

The author of Hebrews did not only encourage the believers to follow Jesus and keep Him central, but, from chapter one he set forth to expound the fact that Christ is exalted to the highest authority in heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father, with all other powers and authority placed under His rule (Hebrews 1:3). He is not only to be the central one to their lives, but Jesus is the reason why they live. In fact, believers are included in God's eternal plan of redemption as children of God, due to inherit all His promises through Jesus. He still acts as a mediator of these promises as He continues to minister before the throne of grace in heaven as our appointed High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-5:10).

As in the Hebrew Christians' time, however many alternative agents existed, which attempted to bridge the separation between a holy God and sinful humanity. These alternatives were believed and practised in other philosophies and religions of the time. What all of them had in common, including those who still clung to Judaism, was the rejection of Christ. It is still a stark reality in our modern world that such a multitude of alternatives exists causing many to reject Jesus as Christ.

In chapter one of this dissertation, we established that in response to Christendom's decline in most Western or previously colonized nations, there has been a response of seeking alternatives. In support of this, Stuart Murray comments that the times we are living in now have seen a remarkable acceptance and adoption of other beliefs and world views. "Neo-paganism, westernised oriental religions, 'new age' ideas, Islam, new religious movements, interest in the occult and other expressions of spirituality are flourishing among this generation" (2004:11). In a world with so many options, it remains our calling, to present Jesus Christ as superior.

Many of the above mentioned alternatives employ angels as mediating authorities (of Hebrews 1:5-14). Islam proclaims that the Quran (Islam's holy book) is a direct gift

from Allah through the angel Gabriel. Qureshi in his book, “No God but One” explains: “Muslims believe the Quran is the very speech of Allah, inscribed on a heavenly tablet, from which it was read by the angel Gabriel and dictated to Muhammad” (2016:106).

New Age and neo-paganism, as well as the occult, consult angels in their rituals and practises. Klark and Geisler affirm in their study on the New Age Movement; “New Age proponents place the more bizarre trappings of their movement which include “channelling” (consulting mediums), crystals (rocks with cosmic power), “Harmonic Convergences”, various occult practises and much more” (1990:131).

Young people are blindly thrusting themselves into the lure of this movement and submitting themselves to demonic principalities when they follow these practises as mediating agents between the physical and spiritual realm. Christ has overcome, and has authority over all other powers and principalities in the spiritual realm. Additionally, he acts as the only mediator between sinful humanity and a holy God. “The Christian message of the cross is hope for genuine personal transformation, social revolution and cosmic reconciliation, not from ourselves, but from God; through Christ the thirst for peace and hope that drives the New Age movement is quenched” (Klark and Geisler, 1990:235).

In our African context, many still cling to the importance of ancestors and ancestor worship. Evidenced in Gerald West’s research of the Bible in African context;

Africans would say that the genealogy of ancestors is an attempt to identify and locate people in their rightful place in the community. The purpose of genealogy is not merely to place a person chronologically it also makes the point that the person belongs. It affirms the person’s “personhood”; Belonging in this sense demonstrates to a person that he is part of something much greater than himself... Africans would say that recounting the genealogy of ancestors also serves to establish a relationship between persons or groups, including the right relationship between the person who is recounting the genealogy and the audience of listeners (1993:68-69).

In response to the African emphasis on ancestry and genealogy, an understanding of Melchizedek would be a relevant counter-argument for Christ’s superior genealogy and His superiority over the ancestors. The book of Hebrews also establishes that through Christ all believers have been assigned a “new genealogy” as children of God,

thus unifying us with one another through His blood, and establishing the relationship between persons or groups.

For those South Africans who grew up in the tradition of the European Reformed Churches, or for those who practise Catholicism, their doctrines places more emphasis on the Old Testament, than the New. More references to the Ten Commandments than to Christ as fulfilment of the entire Law, and whose practise of faith are more prone to emphasise religion steeped in unbiblical traditions. One pertinent example is the tradition taught pre-Apartheid which can be summarised as: “European civilization as the summit of human achievement and the classification of higher and lower life forms” (Smith, 2003:105). The teaching of Hebrews chapter three to five, proclaiming Christ’s superiority over Moses, the Law and the priesthood (or European civilization) would still be very relevant.

4.2.2. The Superiority of Faith

(Hebrews 3:7-4:12; Hebrews 5:11-6:11; Hebrews 6:13-20)

According to the author of Hebrews, faith is having hope for the fulfilment of things that we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1). The Hebrew Christians were losing hope and faith, because as second generation Christians, they could not see the Kingdom promises they expected to be imminent and fulfilled. To make matters worse, their circumstances were getting unbearable in the midst of the persecution they endured.

Two millennia later, Christians are still waiting for the Kingdom promises to be perfected. In some countries the physical persecution of Christians is a daily reality. Meanwhile in more “civilized” countries, Christian virtues and exclusive faith in Christ alone are under attack in the name of tolerance and uniformity. Eventually perpetuating, if only gradually, wickedness and blatant disobedience to God as a more acceptable way of life. Has the Lord Jesus called us to combat and stand against these? Certainly, we are called to stand firm, and in Hebrews 4:1-12, the author of Hebrews calls the Christians to rest.

Those who have faith, have rest, as Guthrie explains:

Hebrews 4 confronts the reader with a spiritual condition of being “out of place” with God’s order, Jesus calls believers to “come to Me and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28-30) Jesus offers true rest, rest that is only found in a right relationship with God through Him (1998:166).

We live in an age of numerous opposing forces against our faith. The tendency to succumb to more frantic activity to reach the lost and fight the depravity through more church-based programs and more outreach opportunities, can leave Christians feeling exhausted and hopeless.

But the author is calling Christians to turn to Christ, since their redeemed position affords them the opportunity to drink deeply from Him and be strengthened and encouraged in their faith as He leads them, like Joshua did the faithful community of Israel, into the Promised Land. Faith in things unseen, means to have faith in Christ and His ability to fulfil His purposes, no matter what the circumstances. From the rest Christ gives those who have faith in Him, they can learn to serve a broken world in the love they themselves received from Christ first.

Perhaps now more than ever, the teaching of Hebrews is not only relevant but necessary. We too can learn, and teach young people to remain faithful and not falter in their faith as the Israelites did, and disqualify themselves to inherit the promises of God. They are rather to imitate the faith of Joshua and Caleb and so, stand out above their generation as “men of faith” who, because of their faith, inherited what was promised (Hebrews 3:7-19).

In the same breath while encouraging the Christians toward faith, the author of Hebrews also reprimanded the Christians for their spiritual immaturity – for still feeding on milk, (like babies) and not on solid food (Hebrews 5:11-14). To this he motivates them to train themselves up, become strong in their faith, like endurance athletes, since this is what their circumstances required.

Even though this is a call to action, it’s not a call to empty works, but rather to hold fast to their hope in Christ and be strengthened by deeper spiritual truths as they draw near to Him in worship, prayer and study. Guthrie’s comment on these verses for the contemporary context agrees in this way: “The word that summons believers to

evaluate their lives and move on in pursuit of holiness must be a consistent word from those who preach the Word of God” (1998:210). Though the time-gap between the Hebrew Christians and today’s young people is vast, the exhortation to make sure they continue to mature in their faith, is as strong and relevant now as it was then.

The bottom line when it comes to faith, is not only the notion of believing in God, but trusting Him. “Faith” (*pistis*) does not denote logic and knowledge, but rather implies trusting in the reliability of the object of our faith – it means wholehearted trust in God whose trustworthiness is immeasurable. “God says that life is more than what can be seen immediately and offers a wealth of spiritual resources in relation to Jesus Christ” (Guthrie 1998:248). What makes faith superior is what it produces in the Christian, in the midst of a turbulent and hopeless world, a firm anchor fastened to the very throne of God through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:19-20).

4.2.3 The Superiority of Christ’s Sacrifice

(Hebrews 2:5-18; Hebrews 9:1-10: 18; Hebrews 13:11-12)

Something that gets lost in the translation of modern Christianity, which the Hebrew Christians understood better, is the necessity and importance of sacrifice. Christ’s sacrifice, especially, demonstrates what it cost for sinful humanity to be re-united with their holy God. Unless young people grew up in a culture such as Islam, or African spiritualism where sacrifices and offerings are still a normal part of life and worship, it largely remains a foreign concept to them. Our task is to re-introduce the story of Jesus and the necessity of His sacrifice to a world where young people have become unfamiliar with Him and Christianity is becoming increasingly marginalized.

Storytelling is an effective manner to do this. The Author of Hebrews drew examples from the rich imagery of the Old Testament. These were familiar to the Hebrew Christians, because of their Jewish heritage. We can also employ these methods when explaining deep spiritual truths. Truths like the necessity for Christ’s sacrifice in order to accomplish salvation. Think of any fairy tale. There is usually a need for a Prince to make some sacrifice, fight a dragon and kiss the princess, in order for there to be a happily-ever-after. Though modern youth may not be familiar with Jewish laws

and practises, their imaginations can be engaged and captured to bring deeper understanding of true Christian tradition.

In apologetics for instance, Craig Hazen in McDowell engages with the idea of using storytelling as means of apologetics. He explains that while he was a student his Professor of Apologetics classified the types of audience the students may encounter as tough minded or tender minded. “The first called tough minded, found logic, propositional argument and hard evidence to be very persuasive; the second tender minded group was more likely persuaded by emotional vehicles such as artistic expression” (2009:99). Hazen sets forth a different discovery in his article as his argument evolves and concludes, that even the toughest minds still engaged with a well told narrative. This is a fact I can personally attest to, as a close loved one possesses one of the toughest, most logical and sceptical minds toward Christianity (and all “organized religion”), yet at the same time has a fascination with graphic novels. Though these narratives play off in a fantasy world, they still manage to communicate human experience in brutally honest, creative and brilliant ways.

Hazen in McDowell quotes famous author C.S Lewis, brilliant theologian and literary scholar who mastered the art of narrative with the Gospel;

The heart of Christianity is myth which is also fact. The old myth of Dying God, without ceasing to be a myth, comes down from heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences (2009:102)

In finding ways of expressing deep spiritual truths through relevant narratives, we could also engage the most tough-minded sceptics into understanding the necessity and importance of the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf. C.S Lewis eloquently succeeded in this task through his children’s book series, *The Narnia Tales* while JRR Tolkien managed to engage all ages with his series, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

4.2.4 Maturing in Faith

(Hebrews 6:4-12; Hebrews 10:26-39; Hebrews 12:7-17)

Youth groups are filled to the brim with attendees, but it is no secret that as they grow older they seem to abandon church attendance. In fact, some eventually never return as the lure of the world and different beliefs steal them away from Christ and His church. Storms' comments on Hebrews 10 brings this tragedy into focus: "many people hear the good news and commit themselves to shape their lives by the ethics of Jesus and in accordance with the standards and life of the local church while never experiencing regeneration and placing their personal trust in Christ for salvation" (2013:216).

Others however, continue to grow in a mature personal relationship with Christ as they take a stand against the lure and temptations of the world and other beliefs, which challenge their faith. Age has nothing to do with the maturity of a person's faith, but instead depends upon the difference regeneration makes in a believer's life. As Guthrie points out: "regeneration relates to our first stage of salvation as an invisible action by an invisible God on a person's invisible spirit, the act of regeneration – that change of one's spirit into something new" (1998:235).

Guthrie goes on to say that nobody can measure regeneration, since people can easily be active participants in the life of faith and the church, while never experiencing true transformation. Only God knows the true condition of a human heart and we can only be faithful in teaching and preaching while God will do the inner work. "If one has truly been transformed, it will be manifest over a long span of time (and during all seasons of life)" (Guthrie, 1998:236).

In regards to God being personally responsible for a Christian's spiritual transformation, Hebrews 12:7-17 illustrates how He accomplishes this as a Father disciplining His children. This illustration holds a powerful image and symbol for our youth as a culture of "fatherlessness" is prevalent in our modern world.

Allison Thomas wrote an article in Zacharias' compilation "Beyond Opinion" discussing the phenomenon and challenges of fatherlessness by referring to a study done by Paul Vitz, a social scientist who wrote a book called "Faith of the Fatherless". He concludes:

Some of the world's most influential atheists (including Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Bertrand Russell and H.G Wells), all had one thing in common: defective relationships with their fathers. Moreover, influential theists (such as Blaise Pascal, Edmund Burke, Moses Mendelsohn and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), during those same historical periods enjoyed a strong, loving relationship with a father figure (2007:56).

From this study, history affirms that a lack of faith, leads to a lack of fatherhood. The reverse is also true as the lack of fatherhood leads to a lack of faith. Evidently, even resistance to being trained up into maturity by any father figure, let alone God the Father. For Christians, and our young people, there is a need to redeem fatherhood as we grow in knowing the perfect Fatherhood of God. We can demonstrate it and teach obedience to God as a loving Father. Without obedience to the training of a loving Father, there will be no maturity.

4.2.5 The Example of the Faith Heroes

As the Author of Hebrews employed the examples of great heroes of the faith in teaching the Christians, his examples still remain relevant today. Their lives still demonstrate how ordinary humans became extraordinary through the unyielding faith they possessed. Unyielding faith being something our young people will need to demonstrate in increasing measure as the world becomes increasingly hostile toward Christians. Platt in his book "Counter Culture" sets forth this argument: "countering culture may prove costly but it won't matter much, for our eyes will not be set on what will be most comfortable to us but instead our lives will be fixed on what is most glorifying to God" (2015: xv).

The list of faith heroes in Hebrews 11 demonstrates the principles of faith as set out under 4.1.5. Firstly, faith is accompanied by action, and secondly, faith does not guarantee a life free from suffering or persecution. It does, however, hold hope and promise for the future, which enables Christians to endure great tribulation, even unto death, with a peace that is only possible through Christ who secures salvation.

The list of faith heroes can even be traced to modern Christians as we can share the stories of missionaries and persecuted believers who kept their faith in spite of great opposition. People such as Elizabeth Elliot, who continued to minister in love and faith

to the very people who murdered her husband. Or as the testimonies of countless Christians in a book compilation called “I am n” (anonymous: 2016) which demonstrates the courageous faith of Christians under threat from Muslim extremists. Their faith inspires and encourages other Christians, and our modern youth to action, just as the list of faith heroes did for the Hebrew Christians.

The greatest encouragement toward faith however, stems from the faithfulness of Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3). He is the author and finisher of our faith; in His faithfulness, He endured opposition from sinful men, and ultimately the cross. Darren de Paul in Cole and Nielson comments; “Jesus summons men to follow Him not as a teacher or pattern of good life, but as Christ the Son of God. Students are not called to a program or personality but to the one who through His obedience provides hope, salvation and restoration” (2016:50). We can be encouraged by the faith of others, but ultimately our focus is on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who sympathizes with our weaknesses and trials while sharing in our faith, since He persevered on our behalf. He is our trailblazer, our ultimate Hero of the Faith.

4.2.6 Endurance

(Hebrews 2:1-4; Hebrews 12:18-28)

The encouragement towards endurance for the Hebrew Christians, was the affirmation of the message of Jesus and how God has set history in motion in fulfilling His plans through His Son. It is not about personal comfort or unlimited and unbridled choice. It is about acknowledging the authority of God’s final Word through His Son. To reject it, or to ignore it, or to drift away from it in the name of tolerance, comfort or less persecution and suffering, is foolish and bears eternal consequences.

Donald Johnson in his book “How to Talk to a Sceptic” comments on the transcendence of Jesus, to a sceptical world which views Him as just another pagan myth or religion. “Christianity is not just a different myth, it is transcendent above all myths, it is different altogether. The myths are humanity’s feeble attempt to explain the transcendent; Christianity is the transcendent come down to humans” (2013:180).

Jesus is different. He invites us away from a mundane existence into participation of eternal life. He adopts believers into His family and makes them heirs to His Kingdom. This new reality is apparent through the evidence of signs and wonders affirmed by the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. As the Hebrew Christians were, we are still waiting for the perfect consummation upon Christ's return. Our waiting however, is not void, we experience the work of the Holy Spirit in us and through us in the establishing of His kingdom.

The greatest evidence of this established reality is the gathering of the people of God and the access they have into His presence, as it is illustrated in Hebrews 12:18-28. Believers gather. They draw near – not to a physical mountain that can be seen or touched, with flashes of lightning which evokes fear. Instead, they draw near to Mount Zion, a heavenly reality, a New Jerusalem. It is a gathering of the faithful, redeemed believers, and to Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a New Covenant. It is a mountain we come to by faith, for now until Christ's return when it will be the mountain where we will worship in unison with thousands of angels and resurrected believers.

Johnson explains all myths and religions' uncanny similarities. Sceptics theorize that they stem from human imagination:

If they arise from people's imaginations, shouldn't they be completely different from place to place? But they aren't... Christianity teaches that myths are not just the result of people's imaginations, but rather our encounter with objective reality: the universe created by the Christian God (2013:185)

A great encouragement in our modern world toward endurance of our faith in Christ remains this; we are not worshipping an imaginary friend, as some sceptics might say. Instead we are worshipping a God who for now is invisible, but tangible in our lives as we experience heavenly realities when we draw near to worship, individually and in our communities of faith. No greater sign of the work of the Holy Spirit exists than this, the gathering of saints who draw near to worship in Spirit and in Truth.

In chapter one of our dissertation, we explored the reality of "Assemblies" – gatherings of people who enjoy the sense of community offered by religion, but not religion itself. Jesus is not just a myth or religion, but the Divine Person who redeemed the relationship between God and sinful humanity. Guthrie affirms our responsibility to

make clear what we mean with “the call to come”; “we need to think clearly about that to which we are inviting people through our public and private proclamations. They have a right to know and we have a responsibility to call them to the “right mountain” of worship” (1998:427). Enduring in this reality, means we keep Him in focus as all things visible and invisible are brought under His authority and rule and as we invite young people to come and draw near to God.

In Summary

In this chapter we have successfully bridged the gap between the age of the Hebrews and our modern age. Though their world is remarkably different from our own, we have proved that the human condition remains the same. We are still a sinful people, separated from their holy God who needs to be brought back into right relationship with Him. This was done through the person and work of Jesus as He fulfilled all the requirements under the Old Covenant and brought in a New Covenant through His blood (Hebrews 1:1-4; Hebrews 8:1-12; Hebrews 9-10). As humanity responds to Him in faith, they are redeemed as the holy people of God (Hebrews 2:10-18).

For modern Christians and the Hebrew Christians alike, this redeemed status has far reaching implications as we bear a new identity as the children of God. This status affords us access into the very presence of God, as individuals and in community (Hebrews 10:19-39; Hebrews 12:18-28). This approach testifies to the restored relationship between humanity and God, but spills over onto our human relationships. Peace with God through Christ affords our restoration to God and in community with one another.

For this reason, the book of Hebrews demonstrates a faith that is not merely a religion or a practise and display of outward laws and sacrifices. Rather, the author brings the focus back to the Person of Jesus Christ who redeemed us by His obedience and sacrifice.

Worship is not focussed on rituals, laws and traditions but on the Person of Jesus. We remain in relationship with Him (Hebrews 13:5), He continues to intercede on our behalf (Hebrews 6:19-21), and as the Champion of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2), teaches

us to follow His example and persevere. He is our living Hero, who makes heroes out of ordinary people (Hebrews 11). We aim to bring Jesus into focus. In Chapter five, we will explore what this looks like practically, as we impart and teach modern youth to take possession of the faith taught in the book of Hebrews. Answering the research question, we want to assist modern youth to be fortified in the Spiritual Disciplines of studying of the Word of God, through prayer and fellowship - as the author of the book of Hebrews did in his time – encouraging them to persevere in their faith in Jesus Christ. We will give an example in Chapter five of a curriculum as solution to the problem, of how a narrative based Bible Study in the book of Hebrews can encourage young people in their Christian faith, in the midst of post religious persecution.

5. CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The book of Hebrews was the answer to a growing concern for Christians, who under external pressures and persecution, were considering denouncing their faith in Jesus Christ. The author's response was not merely to address this concern but to redirect the persecuted Christians' focus, on Jesus. Hebrews Chapter 1 demonstrates this, as the author opens with a proclamation of Jesus and His exalted position. Anything else these Christians faced grew dim in the sight of Jesus, seated on the throne. The problem facing them was answered, by readjusting their focus on Jesus.

In our modern world, the same is true. Amidst the growing challenges our youth face, Christ remains seated on the throne steadfast and true. Therefore, at the conclusion of this dissertation, we are not suggesting the introduction of new methods for youth ministry, but rather to refocus modern youth on the Person of Jesus. Through teaching youth how to interact and communicate with Jesus through the help of the Holy Spirit, our goal is that youth would not only possess knowledge of Christ, but that they will know Him and relate to Him personally.

In essence, we are concerned with the spiritual formation of youth through creating a curriculum which would teach and assist them in growing in the spiritual disciplines of contemplative Bible study, prayer and meditation. We believe that in fellowship with God, young people will be empowered with the adequate fortification to face whatever this world or their circumstances may challenge them with.

The manner in which the Hebrew Christians were encouraged towards their faith, was through hearing the message of Hebrews delivered to them in a sermon, which then circulated as a letter. This is synonymous to the way we sit in church on a Sunday and listen to a pastor preaching a sermon. This presents as the most striking similarity bridging the ancient world of the Hebrew Christians with our modern youth.

In our curriculum, therefore, we will create a fictional narrative which will assist youth to relate to the Hebrew Christians. The original audience were ordinary people who

like modern youth today, hear sermons preached. We assume that this particular sermon enabled life-changing resolves and led them to act in heroic faith, as the author of Hebrews encouraged them. These Hebrew Christians and our modern youth, meet Jesus through the message they hear while presented with real life examples of faith they will hopefully be compelled to follow.

Furthermore, we want to introduce Jesus to youth in two ways in our curriculum. Firstly, we want to help them “see” and personally experience Jesus. We will expand our method and the motivation behind it in this chapter. It will consist of teaching young people to apply their imaginations in engaging with Jesus and the narrative of Hebrews through methods of prayer and meditation. Secondly, we aim to engage their thinking through contemplative Bible study, teaching and imparting knowledge. The Teaching will centre on Jesus’ Person and Work as taught in the book of Hebrews. We will also introduce them to the context and history surrounding the Book of Hebrews as they relate and engage with the “people and the world of Hebrews” through the fictional narrative we create.

Once we have unpacked our motivation and method, we will conclude this dissertation with an example of our youth curriculum. This will serve as the practical application resulting from all our studies in this dissertation.

5.1 Motivation

It is easy to become complacent in teaching, especially in teaching the Word of God. We can become so distant and far removed from what we teach, that we seem more like robots than humans. Our greatest motivation in bridging the gap between the world of the Hebrews, and our modern youth, is to humanize the Word of God so that a sinful people can relate and live in relationship with a holy God. That is after all, what happened with the incarnation of Jesus, as the apostle John wrote, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Professor Rupert Nacoste at North Carolina State University lectures on teaching methods and classroom diversity. He was granted the prestigious award for teaching called the “Universities of North Carolina’s Board of Governor’s Teaching Excellence

Award” in 2013. Nacoste is known for his teaching style; “I have had a very successful career as a professor, that is why some on campus consult with me about classroom dynamics and teaching techniques, my advice to anyone who asks is “humanize the material” (2015:321). In our curriculum we emphasize “humanizing the material” through the fictional narrative we create, but then also inviting youth to think of their lives and relationship with God as they process their own stories in light of what they learn from Scriptures.

Our motivation for utilizing this method, is relationship. We want youth to be able to relate to their teachers and know that they are human. In the same way, the author of Hebrews under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was human and so was the original audience. In fact, Christ became human in order to bring us back into relation with God, and this is magnificently illustrated in the Book of Hebrews. Tedd and Margy Tripp teach parents to embrace the responsibility for their children’s spiritual formation. They teach that Scripture is the authority on formative instruction which “forms and shapes” our children’s thinking; “The Bible is our curriculum for formative instruction, Christ is our example of how to live the Bible” (2008:19). This just further supports how the “Word becomes flesh” as we teach and live the Scriptures. It guards us against becoming complacent in our teaching.

Apart from humanizing the teaching material, our aim is also to engage youth’s minds, especially in engaging their God-given imaginations. Eugene Peterson in his sermon compilation “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”, has another perspective on “taking in” the Word of God. Peterson’s comment on the book of Revelation demonstrates it: “As it turns out in the Christian life, one of the most neglected aspects of reading the Scriptures is reading them formatively and imaginatively, reading in order to live” (2018:366). Eugene Peterson, makes a strong case for the use of our imaginations, to relate to and “see” Jesus.

Jesus Himself often engaged the imaginations of those He taught in parables and stories. On the last night before Jesus was crucified, He taught His disciples in John 15 to remain in Him by using the image of a Vine, its branches and the Vine Dresser. In this same passage, Jesus told the disciples; “You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). Meaning, Jesus teaches how His words have

washed the minds of His disciples. Paul's teaching in Romans 12:2 further supports this, when he calls the Romans to "be transformed by the renewal of their minds", and in Philippians 4:8 he calls the Christians to contemplate all things true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Peter Toon further confirms;

Meditation is particularly an activity of the mind – memory, understanding and imagination. It involves both recalling/remembering and considering/pondering God's Word and deeds with a view to making an appropriate response of the heart and will (1987:61)

Clearly, engaging our imaginations is as ancient as the Word of God. Our goal is to re-introduce Jesus to our modern youth in this ancient yet unfamiliar way. This is especially crucial during an age when being a follower of Jesus is met with increasing opposition. As we have expounded earlier in our studies, the opposition comes from within young people themselves and from the world they live in. In Peterson's sermon, he made the following observation of the prophetic command to "eat this scroll" (Jeremiah 15:16, Ezekiel 2:8 and Rev 10:9):

Jeremiah, John and Ezekiel were all responsible for the spiritual formation of God's people in some of the worst times in history (Babylonian exile and Roman persecution) – a time when God's people needed a Word of God, ready within themselves, capable of convincing their congregations of the gut-level necessity of acquaintance with the Word of God. Yes eat this book. (2018:368)

As the Apostle John received the book of Revelations at a time when Christians were being persecuted, the same was true for the Hebrews writer. In both instances the focus was shifted from the persecution towards Jesus. The call and encouragement both through Revelations and the Book of Hebrews was to worship Jesus. Our encouragement toward young people is to be the same. Ben Beswick in his article, "The Book of Hebrews for Youth Today" relates how a study in the book of Hebrews is like glancing at the work and Person of Christ as a jeweller would inspect a diamond to admire the many facets of its beauty:

A study through Hebrews forces us to not simply accept Christ's supremacy at face value – but to turn it over and over again in our minds so that we can see and learn to appreciate its many facets... our students (through the work of the Holy Spirit) will gain a greater appreciation for what makes Christ so exceptionally beautiful (2016:n.n)

Since Jesus has no physical form, we rely on our God-given imaginations to "see" Him, imaginations which have been redeemed through the blood of Jesus.

Imaginations which is also aided with the help of Scripture. In the case of our curriculum, we aim to stimulate youth's imaginations through a study in the Book of Hebrews and its accompanying fictional narrative. This is what is meant by contemplative Bible study. It involves contemplating a thought, idea or teaching by thinking about it over and over and viewing it from different angles until its true beauty is revealed. I also can't help thinking of the image of a washing machine. Jesus washed His disciples minds with His truth and Word (John 15:3). Our thoughts become washed in the truth of Scripture as it turns around and around like clothes in a washing machine.

This is critical, since modern youth are led to "image" the world according to popular culture and stories (also see Chapter 1:1.1.3.2 "Media and Devices"). Our challenge, as Ted Ternau in his book "Popologetics" identifies, is to pull our young people's imaginations in another direction. Meaning, opposite to what the world teaches and encourages them to do;

As Christians we exist in this tug-of-war between the pull toward being conformed to the patterns of this world and the pull toward being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). This is a tug-of-war for our imaginations, the way we image the world. And at the heart of imagination is worship (2012:213).

We agree that worship lies at the heart of our imaginations. In other words, the manner in which we "image" or "see" the world and process it. Our minds work like computers, processing the data through the lenses of our eyes and the world view we hold. While in the privacy of the inner thoughts of our minds, we relate, react and engage with life and with God. As worship is at the heart of our imaginations (we worship what we think about most), we wish to hone it in through teaching methods of contemplative study, prayer and meditation. Chris Tiegreen wrote on his experience of contemplative study. He took one of the most difficult books to engage with, Leviticus, and repeatedly read and contemplated it. He shares;

By the third or fourth time through, I noticed that I had begun to feel the weight of human sinfulness and the tragedy of the Fall. As I put myself in the emotional context of the Hebrews in the wilderness, the grace and glory of this covenant began to sink in. Absorbing the "feel" of Leviticus enhanced my growth dramatically (2008:74).

These methods can clearly aid Christians to engage with Jesus, individually and in community. Peterson echoed this in his sermon on Revelation:

We learn more about worship in Revelation than from any other book in the Bible – it is permeated by singing and praise, quiet and vigour and our imaginations are stirred to recognize the invisible come into visibility in a relational community... Everything (all symbols, animals etc. in Revelation) means something. Worship is participatory. There are no bystanders. Something is done. We are involved. (2018:367)

In the book of Hebrews, the rich imagery lends itself to contemplation and assists in understanding the work of Christ. This understanding is further filtered through the Christian's knowledge of the Old Testament and Jewish practises. All references to the Law, the covenant, the sacrifices, the blood and the temple mean something. In fact, Hebrews highlights how all of it points to Christ and illustrates the efficiency of His work. The Hebrew writer emphasises how Jesus opened the way into relationship with a holy God when He tore the veil. The result of His work means that nobody is merely a bystander of sacrifices being made on their behalf by priests (or in the case of young people, our pastors and Christian leaders, behind the pulpit). Instead, anyone who receives Jesus as their Great High Priest, is given the right as the children of God. We are part of His family and His Kingdom, no longer bystanders, but actively involved in worshipping Him.

The Book of Hebrews brings Jesus into perspective in the midst of persecution and suffering. Hebrews 1 opens with a scene set on the cosmic stage of heaven where God is seated with Christ at His right hand, having redeemed all of creation and the universe. Whatever follows, unfolds on the backdrop of this established scene.

The imaginations of the Hebrew Christians were being engaged as the writer focussed their attention to the unseen world, which their new standing with God afforded them through the Person and Work of Christ. All of these "heavenly realities" existed at the same time as the Hebrew Christians' circumstances. In other words, while being returning exiles to Rome they were also part of God's Kingdom through Christ. While under pressure to abandon their faith in Christ they were living in and experiencing the result of the work Jesus accomplished on their behalf.

The Hebrew Christians' world exists at the same time as the heavenly realities they stand in through Christ. The same is true for young people living in modern time. Their circumstances co-exist with the heavenly realities communicated through Hebrews. Modern youth also have the added benefit of being able to consider Christians' lives and circumstances in the ancient world and how they can relate to it (or how it relates to them) today.

We aim to bridge this reality for youth in our curriculum. The bridge we aim to build between the Hebrew Christian's lives and their circumstances with our modern youth's lives and circumstances will consist of the fictional narrative we create. We then want to lead youth to contemplate their own realities and circumstances in view of the Scriptures, led by the example of its relevance in the Hebrew Christian's lives. Lastly we will further demonstrate how heavenly realities continue to co-exist with modern Christian's lives, through including testimonies and stories of persevering faith, like those recorded in the book, "I am 'N'".

There is also a relational reality, which motivates us toward the method of engaging youth's imaginations. The Book of Hebrews reveals the Christian's new standing with God through Christ. The Hebrew Christians and believers across centuries are invited to respond by drawing near to God with boldness (Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-22). Believers have access to the very throne of God without restriction since they are washed and redeemed through the blood of Jesus. We approach a real Person, capable of real relationship. This is an idea Dean and Foster in their book, "The God-bearing Life" shares in this way: "God is a relationship. Significant relationships with other Christians matter because they teach us something about what God is like – the One who loves us in spite of ourselves and who loves us passionately enough to suffer willingly on our behalf" (1998:26-27). It becomes apparent that as a Christian grows in relationship with God, they also learn to live in relationship with other believers through Him.

God introduces this relationship through story. As Dean and Foster agree, most of the Bible consists of telling a story, "We are "story creatures" – we humans tend to think and process meaning through the stories we tell and hear and perform for each other." (2012:214)

Part of the challenge our modern youth face stems from this reality. Dean and Foster expound on how humans find their meaning through stories. They observed that producers of popular culture are not only aware of it, but also use it to their advantage as they drive agendas opposite to what the Word of God teaches: “Some are obvious about it: movies, sitcoms, comic books, and so forth. You can find stories even when you don’t expect to, such as within trends or popular issues (abortion, homosexuality, global warming...)” (2012:214). Detweiler in Johnston’s compilation of essays called “Reframing Theology and Film” warns of a similar danger, “we have been warned about the power of images to rally troops for reprehensible causes and idol worship, but none of those warnings have prevented or slowed the march of our electronic era” (2007:48). He continues optimistically that there’s opportunity for this generation to unite that which in previous generations have been separated, and calls it “a recovery of visual aesthetics”. Such a recovery exists as we help young people discover their place in God’s cosmic story. In other words, through story we aim to guide youth into re-imagining their world’s and lives through the lenses of the truth taught in the Book of Hebrews. This “worldview” has a direct influence on the formation of their identities, as they identify and relate their lives to the life revealed in Christ.

Doctors Clinton and Clark specialize in counselling teenagers. According to them, the teenage years are identity forming years; “During these years, young people have to answer the question, ‘Who am I?’” (2010:7). The idea with our curriculum is to guide youth into answering this question of finding their part in God’s story just as the Hebrew Christians found their part in God’s story. In this manner, spiritual formation becomes a crucial part of youth’s identity formation as Shantelle Weber and Dr. Christo Thesnaar concludes in their article, “The Impact of Authentic Worship Experiences on the Faith Development of South African Youth”:

Youth need good role models and guidance in their search for a deeper faith. They need assistance in making their spiritual formation part of their identity formation. They need to be discipled or mentored in developing a faith that becomes their own. Their faith needs to be relevant to what their daily experiences and gifts and talents are (2009:155).

We find our place in God’s story through His Word. As the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14), we know Jesus through His Word. In the book of Hebrews, this is the same

Word through which all of creation is sustained (Hebrews 1:3). He is the final revelation of God who previously spoke through the prophets and in many ways, and as we are still living “in these last days”, He continues to speak through the Son, Jesus (Hebrews 1:2-3).

We wish to impart the Word of Jesus to young people in such a way that they would be familiar with Jesus and find themselves immersed as characters in His story. While keeping in mind that the purpose of our dissertation is to encourage faith in the midst of faithlessness and persecution. As the Hebrews’ author demonstrated, we do this through imparting knowledge, teaching that Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s plan and in this manner exhorting believers.

5.2 Method

Mark Yaconelli in his book, “Growing Souls: Experimenting in Contemplative Youth Ministry” made a keen observation about spiritual formation;

Spiritual formation is not the same as learning about a concrete object. It’s not the same as trying to retain theological principle. Christian formation is much more like trying to grow and deepen relationship with another person... Information, knowledge and teaching can deepen and expand relationship, but without tending to the actual living relationship you have nothing (2007:37).

Yaconelli was part of a team conducting the Youth Ministry Spirituality Project. He explains that the purpose of their project was the “resurrection and cultivation of the aspect of our faith life that is in communion with God” (2007:37). The greatest difference between Christianity and other religions is found in this fact. Our God is a relational God, and He has made it possible to be in constant communion and relationship with Him through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Michael Hryniuk contributed to the study done by Mark Yaconelli. He found that a contemplative approach to youth ministry answered many of our modern culture’s needs and drives, simply by coming back to the truth of this relational aspect of the Christian’s life through this basic spiritual discipline:

The influences of individualism, consumerism and competitiveness in the dominant culture make the intentional spiritual formation of youth more difficult – but also more critical. In the face of the anxiety and pressure young people now contend with, a contemplative approach to youth ministry invites young people to walk with Jesus on the journey of the beloved – a journey in which

we open ourselves to hearing the still, small voice of God's Spirit who calls us by name, claims us in God's love and sends us forth to anoint others in mercy and compassion (2007:57).

The aim of journeying with young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus, serves the purpose for their personal spiritual formation and well-being. It also adequately equips them as agents, ready to serve in God's redemption plan as they share in His identity and purpose. Dean and Foster agrees; "When we tend to our relationships with young people, we impart the gospel in a way that prepares them for mission, God needs their prophetic voices in the church, their culture and their families" (1998:26).

Beth Baleke, in Terry Linhard and David Livermore, shares her thoughts on raising youth. Her focus is especially on African Christian youth, who would have a positive influence on their communities. Along with imparting life-skills she also championed the idea that the formation of youth need to be holistic in its approach: "youth ministries' should be holistic in nature, contributing to the development of the whole person. In our strategies, we must concern ourselves with youth's intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical well-being (Luke 2:52)" (2011:93).

Contemplative ministry focusses on building the Christian up from the inside out. As they become more sensitive to the Holy Spirit's guidance, their love and experience of Christ grows. This naturally has an effect on how they process and live in their world; "Amid the challenges and opportunities of this unique life stage, the gospel can mark emerging adults with a clear identity rooted in God's story fuelled by an irrepressible passion for the kingdom" (Setran and Kiesling: 2013, 239).

People, but especially young people often separate their inner spiritual life, with their secular lives, as Tozer also affirms in his book "The Pursuit of God":

One of the greatest hindrances to internal peace which the Christian encounters is the common habit of dividing our lives into two areas, the sacred and the secular, as these areas are considered to exist apart from each other, our inner lives tend to break up so that we live a divided instead of a unified life (2006:121).

What we mean to do in the contemplative approach of our curriculum, is to bridge the gap by creating more opportunities for a time of guided meditation on Scripture and in God's presence. We want to guide youth into seeing how integrated their spiritual

lives are with their secular lives as they take time to engage their hearts and minds with the Scripture. This principle was originally taught in Deuteronomy 6:5-9 “⁵Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

Deuteronomy commands the turning over of God’s Law in our minds, and mentions different methods of doing so. It involves carrying them on our hearts (thinking over them fondly), talking about them at home and along the road, pondering over them, wearing them, writing them down. In doing so, our inner lives permeate and overflows into our physical lives as we learn to love God with our heart, souls and strength. This is why this method answers the problem of how a youth curriculum in the book of Hebrews could encourage youth towards faith in Christ.

It also includes practising the Spiritual Discipline of silence and solitude. In our curriculum most of the study will be done in silence and solitude as youth are led to contemplate and pray. Whitney in his book on Spiritual Disciplines champions the discipline of silence and solitude. He explains that it is the one discipline that helps the Christian to connect and provides the time and space for all the other disciplines to be practised;

It is in silence and solitude where we engage in personal Bible intake and prayer. In silence and solitude we also maximize time for Disciplines such as learning and journaling. It’s also common to practise fasting during times of silence and solitude. But more than anything else, the Disciplines of silence and solitude can be so transfiguring is because they provide time to think about life and to seek God (2014:237).

Christians, who have been fortified in the presence of God during personal worship, are also ready to share in God’s kingdom and purposes. This practise is also often one that is neglected in our technologically advanced world, since every “quiet” space is filled with audio or visual noise. “One of the costs of technological advancement is a greater temptation to avoid quietness... these advantages may come at the expense of our spiritual depth if we do not practise silence and solitude” (Whitney 2014:238).

One of the dangers Whitney points out for lack of silence and solitude, is that it keeps Christians away from contemplating the more solemn realities of our faith life, such as coming to grips with sin, judgment and death (2014: 229). We wish to teach youth the benefits and the practise of silence and solitude, so they may gain a greater spiritual depth, which will enable them to stand in a challenging world.

This is why this method answers the problem of how a youth curriculum in the book of Hebrews could encourage youth towards faith in Christ. David Crowder in his book on worship called, "Praise Habits" defines what we mean: "We need to continually redefine what our spiritual disciplines look like, an importunate redefining that define us... There is a continual shedding of depravity and taking on of His righteousness" (2004:35). It is in the private places of young people's lives where they are faced with the problems and the enemy within. When a teenager closes their bedroom door, with a world of cyberspace at their fingertips, the fortification they received during their times of contemplating Scripture in silence and solitude has the power to enable them to withstand the enemy from within.

It's not just a stale discipline either, "there is the need for us to embrace this new way of living that is found in the person of Christ" (Crowder 2004:35). Teaching youth to grow in the spiritual disciplines is to show them how to live and find life in their position in Christ, which the book of Hebrews assures us of. We have a Priest who intercedes on our behalf, who is approachable and not deterred by our sin and failures. We want to teach youth to embrace the God who first embraced them and for youth to grow in a personal knowledge of God; "if we habitually seek God and His perspective through His Word when we are alone – and not just at church or when we are with other Christians – then we may be hopeful that we do know God" (Whitney 2014:235).

There are many ways in which one can create the space for silence and solitude. Dr Karl D. Lehman the author of "The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life" is a qualified psychiatrist and a follower of Jesus. In his own words, he has "discovered several simple tools that enable most people to consistently perceive God's presence and establish an interactive connection with His living presence" (2016:19).

The biblical basis for the Immanuel Approach, stems from one of the names by which Jesus is called, “Immanuel: God with us”; “The Lord is always with us, and we should expect to be able to perceive His presence, since He wants to have a living and interactive relationship with us” (Lehman 2016:551). This simple, yet profound concept, is also supported by Christ’s teaching in the Gospel of John that He abides in us through the Holy Spirit (John 14, 16, 15 and 17). The imagery that comes to mind, is that God has made His home with us, and that we are part of Him and therefore never alone.

Part of the Immanuel Approach is to experience God. It follows a process where we use our imaginations and “spiritual senses” to hear, see, touch and smell God.

A good positive, sanctified imagination out of a pure heart has inspired thoughts. If imagination actually may be the bridge we use to receive revelation, when a sanctified imagination pictures God, it may be seeing God by the Spirit of revelation (“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God”) (Velotta 2014:87).

The Book of Hebrews possesses a wealth of imagery, which engages the imagination and brings Christ into focus. There are so many approaches to help young people grow in their ability to apply Scripture and have real encounters with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Rick Warren teaches different Bible study methods, and calls this particular style “The Devotional Method of Bible Study”; “this involves taking a passage in the Bible, large or small, and prayerfully meditating on it until the Holy Spirit shows you how to apply its truth in your life in a way that is personal, practical and provable” (2011: 35-36).

Similarly, Alice Fryling in her book *The Art of Spiritual Listening*, provides tools for engaging the imagination to encounter God. She adapted her style from a traditional monastic practise of scriptural reading: “Lectio Divina is described many different ways, not always in categories with Latin titles. Sometimes this way of reading Scripture is described simply as the “4 R’s”: read, reflect, respond, rest” (2003: 42). We have made our own adaption of the “4 R’s” and will include it in our curriculum. Below, is an example of our own adaption of the “4 R’s”.

In our curriculum on the narrative Bible study of the book of Hebrews, the idea is, to incorporate the “4 R’s” as a manner of personal reflection and contemplation of the Scriptures. In essence the reader will be looking at the Scripture from their own perspective and personal encounter after seeing it through another perspective, particularly that of the fictional character’s encounter with the same Scripture. In the case of the Bible Study in Hebrews, the reader can visualize the fictional character’s circumstances, draw from their emotions and “paint a picture” of the world in which the fictional character found themselves and how it relates to them.

Sample of The Four R’s - Redeeming Imagination

1. Read

In our curriculum, “reading” will be combined with the reading of the fictional narrative. The reader will be invited to engage with the Scripture and the world of the Hebrew Christians through reading their stories and how the same Scriptures enabled them to persevere in their faith.

- Ask the Holy Spirit to make you sensitive to His leading
- Prayerfully read the passage of Scripture through a few times (it will help if you are able to read it in different translations)
- As you read, some verses will start to stand out more than others, note these Scriptures. Perhaps you related to the circumstances of the character in the book of Hebrews. Note it.
- Ask, why? Is it speaking into your circumstances or feelings? Is the Lord saying something specific to you? Are you encouraged or did you receive confirmation or affirmation?

2. Reflect

For the purpose of our curriculum, this step in the process of engaging with the fictional narrative and the Scripture in Hebrews, is specifically aimed at the reader’s personal encounter with Jesus and the particular Scripture(s). Perhaps the reader will relate to the circumstances of the fictional character, because they are facing similar challenges. Perhaps it will be the Scripture itself. In any case, this step invites the reader to have the freedom to engage the Scripture on a personal level as they reflect on it.

Isolate those verses that stood out to you and reflect on them by using your God-given imagination to meet with Jesus, you can guide your imagination in this way:

- A meeting place; You can image a meeting place with Jesus, either within the fictional narrative or you could simply wish to meet with Jesus on your own and discuss the Scripture with Him as you would with a friend. Where are you as you meet with Jesus? Is it in the story of the fictional character? Is it in a special place you like to meet with Jesus in your imagination (a forest, a beach) Or are you simply meeting with Him, right where you are, at the kitchen table, or at the desk in your bedroom, or on your bed? In the lounge on the couch?
- Where are you as you see Jesus approaching? What does He look like? What is the expression on His face, is He smiling or does He look serious? What emotion do you feel as you see Him approach?
- When He reaches you, what does He do? Does He sit, or is He waiting for you to invite Him to sit? Is He sitting next to you, or in front of you?
- He speaks; what is He saying to you about the specific passages? Not only the original intent of the passages but what does He wants you to know? Is it about Him? Is it about you? Is He asking you to change; or is He comforting, guiding or teaching you? And what is He comforting, guiding or teaching you into?
- Write it down

3. Respond

This step encourages the application of the Scripture to the reader's personal life and circumstances. The reader is given the opportunity to respond to what they have personally gained or learned from the Scripture. Response also includes worship. It is important for young people to learn that approaching God is a form of worship and that He also enables them to express themselves in many ways. Here, youth could even draw a picture, write a poem, listen to a song, dance, or sing as a response to what the Lord has taught them. Where applicable, we will make a suggestion to a hymn which relates to the teaching. Weber and Thesnaar says that teaching youth a variety of manners and circumstances in which to worship will encourage them into a genuine relationship with God: "Other forms as worship should be encouraged as a method of expression. This enables youth to use their talents to express themselves to God, and in this way worship becomes real and honest to them as they relate to God" (2009:154). At the heart we wish to guide youth in having a personal encounter with Jesus, and in this manner, deepen their knowledge and personal relationship with Him. It will take more than allegiance to a religion or organisation for youth to stand

in an age of growing hostility toward Christians. The only answer is a deep faith which is rooted in a personal relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ.

- How do you respond to what Jesus has said to you or shown you? Do you need to repent? Is there something you need to surrender to Him? Are you awe struck?
- Worship is a response. Respond by writing a poem, a letter. Draw a picture that comes to mind. Listen to or sing a song that proclaims your faith or expresses what you have learned.
- If you don't understand something, ask for clarity.

4. Rest

We have set out in this dissertation to prove how the book of Hebrews encourages faith in the midst of persecution. This step will allow them to define how the Scriptures and stories, along with their personal encounter and worship encourage their faith in Christ.

- Take some time to recount the time you have spent with God
- Read over what you wrote, look at your drawings, think through your response
- How do these Scriptures encourage trust in God? How does it fortify and encourage your faith in Christ?

5.3 Example of Curriculum

We have set out under the previous two headings, to explain why we have chosen to focus on specific elements for our youth curriculum and how we intend to apply it. In summary, we aim to accomplish engaging youth's minds and hearts while teaching them to practise and grow in the spiritual disciplines. Disciplines which will strengthen their faith, like an athlete who builds up strength through the discipline of exercising his muscles. In another analogy, it is like putting soldiers through basic training so they are enabled to stand firm and respond correctly on the battle field. Our youth are certainly on a battle field, as we have proved in the first chapter of this dissertation, and therefore needs the strengthening necessary to stand and fight.

We wish to engage youth in the disciplines by combining fictional story-telling, with Bible study, followed by prayer and contemplation. At the end of each lesson, we will guide youth to write their "own story" based on what they have studied as a response and application. Encouraging youth to share their own stories, will also prepare them

for witnessing their faith. One of the most daunting Spiritual Disciplines, are Evangelism and witnessing. In Ogden's book "Discipleship Essentials" he shares: "To be effective witnesses we need anxiety reduction. There is nothing like anxiety to block authenticity. In order for our witness to be compelling it must be experienced as congruent to who we are" (2007:167). In teaching youth to process and retell their own stories through their experience of the Bible Study, we are helping them to witness in congruence with who they are. This process will authenticate their faith and teach them to be effective witnesses, without the anxiety. To further aid youth in processing their stories, some lessons may also include further reading of Christians who witness and tell their stories amidst persecution in a modern context.

5.3.1 Lesson Outline

Listed below is a summary of a typical lesson outline, followed by a demonstration of how the outline will be applied in our curriculum (see under heading 5.3.3). Each lesson will start with a fictional story in order to draw the reader in. The fictional stories will create the setting. In this case it demonstrates the House Church congregation made up of Hebrew Christians in Rome, who upon occasion have heard the book of Hebrews preached to them. Specific truths taught in the sermon, had direct application to specific problems they were faced with, led them to a resolve and ultimately encouraged them toward faith in Christ. The lesson layout was designed in such a way, that youth will cross over back and forth between the world of the Hebrews, the Biblical text and their own lives in a modern world.

Lesson Layout:

- Fictional Story (Problem)
- Relevant Text from Hebrews (directly addressing the problem in the fictional story)
- The fictional character's interaction and resolve of the relevant text
- Self-Study;
 - Prayer and contemplation based on the relevant text (step by step instructions as demonstrated through "The Four R's" (pg 158-160) will

make it possible for private use or in a group setting). Youth will be encouraged to keep a journal in order to write their response and prayers

- Response:
 - “My Story” – teaching youth to process their stories also encourages and teaches them to evangelise by simply sharing their own experiences on how the Scriptures and the Spirit has made an impact in their lives. As Whitney on evangelism writes; “The Spirit does not empower all Christians to evangelize in the same way, but He does give believers the power to be witnesses of Jesus Christ – the evidence for the power to witness is a changed life” (2014:124).
- Share “My Story”
 - Youth will be encouraged to share their written story with the rest of the group. If they are studying on their own, they will be encouraged to share this specific story with a friend, teacher, sibling or parent. Once again, we wish to teach youth as Whitney says that, “evangelism is a natural overflow of the Christian life, every Christian should be able to talk about what the Lord has done or what He means to him or her” (2014:127).
- Additional Reading – here a modern day example will be given as the witness we included in the sample curriculum below

5.3.2 Suggested Introduction

The following is taken out of the actual curriculum, which is under construction:

Prologue

(No relevant text in the prologue, since we are creating the setting based on our research of the world and circumstances of the Hebrew Christians):

“There was an attentive silence as people strained to drink in every word that was read. It seemed as if the words being read fell like rain on desert sand. Recent circumstances have left our small community of Christ followers arid. Many are thinking of turning back. People like Joshua, who still bore a bruised eye and a sling for his arm after the confrontation he had with his father after synagogue. Joshua spoke up as the Law was read. To him it clearly spoke about Jesus, and he couldn’t

help but affirm that fact. His father was so enraged that he gave him the beating of his life. Many, like Joshua, are struggling to see the purpose, saying, "What's the use?" Why stick to a faith that has brought so much sorrow to so many...

The words of this letter now being read before our despondent community made all the difference. These are our stories. May it also strengthen you in your faith as it did us."

5.3.3 Example of Lesson

Based on Hebrews 3:1-5

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵ 'Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,' bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Fictional Narrative:

Leah's Story

Leah is a 15-year-old young Hebrew woman living in Rome. Her parents were amongst those who attended, what her mom called, "that earth shaking Pentecost" in Jerusalem. Her mom loves telling, "As I stood there, listening to the Apostle Peter's witness, my heart caught fire!" And it's been burning ever since. A contagious fire which have also recently set her daughter Leah's heart on fire for Jesus. Not to the delight of her devoted Jewish grandparents and betrothed.

"Where does your allegiance lie?" Benjamin asked me with a disgusted look on his face. This man I've loved all my life, for since childhood our families betrothed us to one another. Benjamin, as his name sake, was a proud son of Israel, deeply passionate about the Law and the temple. Funny, since this is what attracted me to him once. Now it scares me as I take a lashing from Benjamin's tongue; "You need

to let go of this idea that the Nazarene imposter was the Messiah. Don't you have any regard for the house you belong to? This nonsense has already seen you expelled from the synagogue!" He must have seen me cower from that memory, for his eyes softened. "Let it go Leah, or must the life we've been preparing for all our lives be forfeit because of this Jesus? Think of the house you belong to, of Israel, think of Moses and the LORD. "

Bible Study

Hebrews 3:1-5

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. ² He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. ³ Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. ⁴ For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ⁵ 'Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,' bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Commentary on the Passage:

3:2 – The author now employs a new dimension to the community's confession, as he adapts Numbers 12:7 claiming that Jesus was, "faithful to the one that appointed Him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house". A claim that is not meant to offend Jewish listeners, as Thompson states, "just as the author's task in chapter 1 and 2 was not to engage in polemic against angels, here his task is not to denigrate Moses but to introduce one who is faithful as a point of comparison to the Son" (2008:89). The author's purpose thus, is one of comparison and not anti-Semitic. He is not trying to degrade the Old Testament, but instead attempting to show how Jesus is a fulfilment of it. The author further clarifies what is meant by the "house" in which Moses was faithful to serve, to which Bruce states: "The house of Numbers 12:7 in which Moses was faithful to serve was not the tent of meeting but the people of Israel, the family of God" (1990:92). This implies that Jesus as apostle and high priest in comparison to Moses was a faithful servant not to a place or institution, but to the people/family of God. From this scripture, it becomes clear that God had already begun a work of making a people for Himself. It began with Moses and was brought to fruition in Jesus.

3:3-4 Developing the thought that God has been building His house, starting with Moses and ending with Christ, the author now plainly states that Jesus deserves higher honour than Moses. Once again, not a statement made to defame Moses, but rather one to put into perspective the fulfilment of the plan of God. As this is a sensitive matter, which could easily be misinterpreted as being opposed to the Old Covenant, the author employs a simple illustration of a house being built, something the readers could easily grasp. Hagner states plainly, “The author in effect associates Jesus with the builder, whereas Moses remains associated with the house” (1990:60). A more rounded explanation is given by Bruce on the position of Moses in comparison to Jesus in the household of God: “Moses was a household servant, exalted by virtue of his outstanding faithfulness to the owner and builder of the house, God, but Christ is the Son of God and together with the Father is founder and inheritor of the household” (1990:92). Moses thus served faithfully in God’s household, fulfilling his duties as God required of him, duties which pointed toward the promise of the Son who would ultimately bring the household into its final state. For those listening, and for us today, we can conclude that Christ did not bring in a new plan, but fulfilled the plan God had started to put in motion since before Moses’ time.

3:5-6 The train of thought reaches its completion as the author continues to explain the different roles between Moses as a servant of the household and Christ as the Son; “Moses was faithful “as a servant” (*ōs therapon*) whereas Christ was faithful “as a son” (*ōs huios*), the purpose of Moses’ role “as part of the household” was to point to the later revelation, anticipating God’s revelation in the Son “who is over the household” (Guthrie 1998: 129). There is no turning back, for those Jewish Christians who were considering a return to Judaism, this would have been definitive, since it identifies Jesus as the head of the household God began to build where Moses was a servant. Those who believe in Christ have become part of the household of God, a reality Thompson explains would have changed the community’s symbolic world with a bold affirmation “we are His household” (2008:91). The claim of being part of God’s household is conditional however, as we see in verse 6, “*if we hold firm to the confidence and hope in which we glory*”: “Membership in God’s household is not to be taken for granted, faithfulness is required not only of God’s special servants (Moses) and His Son, but of His people as well” (Hagner 1990:61). The author presents his listeners with the first of many exhortations to remain steadfast in their faith. The

community of Christians are a family, in the household of God and in order to remain so they must follow Moses' example as faithful servant, under Christ's authority who is the head of the house. No wonder – as Thompson points out – that the author uses the word *katechein* “to hold firm” regularly, since it is synonymous with being patient, enduring and being faithful (2008:92). The Hebrew Christians are constantly being reminded of the patient and faithful enduring faith of those who went before them.

Personal Study

The Four R's - Redeeming Imagination

1. Read

- Ask the Holy Spirit to make you sensitive to His leading
- Prayerfully read the passage of Scripture through a few times (it will help if you are able to read it in different translations)
- As you read, some verses will start to stand out more than others, note these Scriptures. Perhaps you related to the circumstances of the character in the book of Hebrews. Note it.
- Ask, why? Is it speaking into your circumstances or feelings? Is the Lord saying something specific to you? Are you encouraged or did you receive confirmation or affirmation?

2. Reflect

Isolate those verses that stood out to you and reflect on them by using your God-given imagination to meet with Jesus, you can guide your imagination in this way:

- A meeting place; You can image a meeting place with Jesus, either within the fictional narrative or you could simply wish to meet with Jesus on your own and discuss the Scripture with Him as you would with a friend. Where are you as you meet with Jesus? Is it in the story of the fictional character? Is it in a special place you like to meet with Jesus in your imagination (a forest, a beach) Or are you simply meeting with Him, right where you are, at the kitchen table, or at the desk in your bedroom, or on your bed? In the lounge on the couch?
- Where are you as you see Jesus approaching? What does He look like? What is the expression on His face, is He smiling or does He look serious? What emotion do you feel as you see Him approach?
- When He reaches you, what does He do? Does He sit, or is He waiting for you to invite Him to sit? Is He sitting next to you, or in front of you?
- He speaks; what is He saying to you about the specific passages? Not only the original intent of the passages but what does He wants you to know? Is it about Him? Is it about you? Is He asking you to change; or is He comforting, guiding or teaching you? And what is He comforting, guiding or teaching you into?

- Write it down

3. Respond

- How do you respond to what Jesus has said to you or shown you? Do you need to repent? Is there something you need to surrender to Him? Are you awe struck?
- Worship is a response. Respond by writing a poem, a letter. Draw a picture that comes to mind. Listen to or sing a song that proclaims your faith or expresses what you have learned. Song Suggestion: “Cornerstone”; “On Christ the Solid Rock”
- If you don’t understand something, ask for clarity.

4. Rest

- Take some time to recount the time you have spent with God
- Read over what you wrote, look at your drawings, think through your response
- How do these Scriptures encourage trust in God? How does it fortify and encourage your faith in Christ?

Discussion:

How about you? Can you relate? Have you or your family or friends grown to love the buildings and traditions of religion more than the Architect and Builder?

Fictional Character’s Resolve:

Leah

What Benjamin did not realise was that I had been thinking of the house I belong to, of Moses, of the LORD. The words of that letter made everything crystal clear. God is the Architect, Moses was just a servant in His house, and Jesus is the Builder.

I love Benjamin, but this is so much bigger than us, or our families. The House is so much larger than we ever imagined.

“My Story”

Take time to process your Bible study time, and then write down your story as you share what you have learned or gained from today’s lesson. Especially focus on how today’s lesson encouraged your faith in Jesus. Is there something you understand better? Is there something you need to stop doing or start doing?

Tell your Story

Read your own story to yourself. Now read it to the group. If you are doing this study on your own, share it with a friend, a teacher, a parent or a sibling.

Additional Reading from Modern Day Persecution:

“The Boy who would not back down” (Anonymous 2016:161-164)

At school in Turkey, nine year old Hussein fumbled excitedly with the clasp on his necklace. After fastening it around his neck, he straightened the cross pendant. He was proud to let his teachers and fellow students know of his new Christian faith. The feeling was not mutual.

In his innocence, Hussein didn't know that 96% of Turks are Muslim. He didn't know that practicing another faith was culturally unacceptable. He didn't know that despite government claims of religious tolerance, Jesus followers are not welcome in many parts of his country. Hussein knew none of this the morning he first put on the cross pendant. He knew only that his father, a former Islamic scholar, loved Jesus and so did he. His faith was as real to him as the cross he just put on around his neck. “it's not the physical cross”, Hussein tells; “It's the meaning of the cross. I want my friends to ask me about it, so I can tell them about Jesus.” He did not anticipate the danger wearing that cross would incite. Some students spit on him, others swore at him. They threatened him because he had embraced “the religion from the West”. Hakeem, his father bristled; “Don't ever tell people that you are a Christian!” he warned. “Do you want us to get into trouble? You must never wear that cross to school again!” Later Hakeem and his wife decided that it was wrong of them to force their son to suppress his faith. They realized that both of them had suppressed their faith and that Hussein's boldness, naïve and idealistic though it was, should be celebrated, not condemned. So they encouraged Hussein to share his faith, and went to school to confront the teachers about the abuse their son had been enduring. Instead of support, Hakeem found himself ridiculed and threatened, one teacher even threatening to shoot him if he saw him in the street. The attacks on Hussein also continued at school. The opposition to Hussein's faith only grew stronger and even came from some of the teachers. Hakeem and his wife transferred their son to another school, and then to another before they found one where Hussein experienced fewer attacks. Even as an eleven-year old boy, Hussein remained steadfast in his faith.”

(Anonymous 2016:161-164)

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