

“LET US APPROACH”:
SOTERIOLOGY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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Much has been written on the Christology of the book of Hebrews.¹ Its soteriology, however, deserves more attention than it has received. Soteriological studies have usually focused on the warning passages and their implications for the doctrine of perseverance. Few attempts have been made to characterize the book's soteriology as a whole.² The images of salvation presented in Hebrews are significantly different from the familiar images of justification and reconciliation that are the usual focus of systematic theologies. They enrich our understanding of the soteriology of the NT. They also have significant implications for the lives of believers, both individually and corporately. For the author of Hebrews, salvation is a pilgrimage toward a promise, a journey toward God. It is grounded in relationship. Worship is both its means and its end. To explore the soteriology of Hebrews, I will first outline the basis of salvation, then focus on the nature of salvation, and finally discuss the results of salvation, including ethics and assurance.

I. THE BASIS OF SALVATION

The salvation presented in the book of Hebrews was revealed by God through the Son (Heb 1:1–3). It was proclaimed first by the Lord Jesus and confirmed to writer and audience by eyewitnesses (2:3), and it was attested by signs and miracles and by demonstrations of the Holy Spirit (2:4). Hebrews does not take time to establish humanity's need of salvation. It assumes the OT understanding of sin and the need for atonement. The author

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¹ A classic discussion is that of O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

² One exception is an article by G. R. Osborne, who contends that the soteriological concerns of the author of Hebrews determine the contents of the epistle (“Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Grace Unlimited* [ed. C. H. Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975] 145). Even Osborne, however, begins his discussion by treating God's sovereignty, free will, and the possibility of apostasy. Recent studies of the warning passages include R. Sauer, “Can Salvation Be Lost?,” *Fundamentalist Journal* 3/1 (January 1984) 54–55; A. Mugridge, “Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (September-December 1987) 74–82; T. K. Oberholtzer, “The Warning Passages in Hebrews,” *BSac* 145 (January-March 1988) 83–97, (April-June 1988) 185–196, (July-September 1988) 319–328, (October-December 1988) 410–419; S. McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992) 21–59.

mentions that the high priest has to offer daily sacrifice for his own sins and those of the people (5:1–3). People stand in need of “purification for sins” (1:3). They need to have their consciences cleansed from “dead works” (9:13–14; 6:1) and to be equipped to do (literally) “good works” (10:24; cf. 6:10). The phrase “dead works” probably refers to works of sin rather than works of the law.³ The author contends, however, that the measures for dealing with sin under the old covenant are insufficient. It is impossible for animal sacrifices to deal permanently with sin (10:4). Because the law cannot “make perfect those who approach,” it must require ceaseless sacrifices that serve to remind people of sin even as they attempt to deal with sin (10:1–3).

Much as Paul does in Romans and Galatians, the author of Hebrews subordinates the law to God’s promise. Beginning with Abraham, believers under the old covenant received and lived by God’s promise. They remained faithful to that promise even though they did not live to see its fulfillment, which took place in the person and work of Christ (11:13, 39–40). Believers in Christ are the heirs of God’s promises under the old covenant—and of even better promises under the new (6:17; 8:6).

Through God’s grace and by God’s will, salvation has been provided in Christ (2:9; 10:10). Although Hebrews does not spell out a detailed theory of atonement, it does emphasize certain aspects of Christ’s work. For example, while Hebrews emphasizes the divinity of Christ to prove the superiority of the revelation he brings (1:1–3), it also emphasizes his human nature and his identification with human beings. The incarnation was necessary for salvation to be accomplished. The Son had to become human in order to bring “many children to glory” (2:10). The glory mentioned here is equivalent to the “salvation” mentioned in 1:14; 2:3. It is the glory God intended for human beings, as expressed in the quotation from Psalm 8 (2:7).⁴ The Son also had to become human to experience the death that would provide atonement for sin (2:9) and destroy the power of the devil (2:14). Finally, the incarnation allowed the Son to be made “perfect through suffering” (2:10). He identified fully with the pain and weakness of humanity so that he could become a faithful and merciful high priest to make atonement for their sins and help them in their trials (2:17–18). The incarnation is thus foundational to the atonement: “In Jesus the members of the house-church are to find the solemn pledge of their own entrance into the glorious destiny intended by God for them. That intention will be realized precisely because Jesus identified himself with us.”⁵

Hebrews presents the atonement in images of redemption and sacrifice. The image of redemption or liberation appears along with a *Christus victor* motif: Jesus came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear

³ H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 164; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 113. Quotations from the English Bible are from the NRSV.

⁴ W. L. Lane, *Call to Commitment: Responding to the Message of Hebrews* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985) 47.

⁵ *Ibid.* 46.

of death” (2:14–15). The *Christus victor* idea is also implicit in the pictures of Jesus as *archēgos* (“pioneer, champion”) and *prodromos* (“forerunner”). The major image of the atonement, however, is that of sacrifice: Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26). This sacrifice was part of his high-priestly work (2:17). His death was vicarious and was universal in its intention: He died “for everyone” (2:9). He bore the sins “of many” (9:28). Through his “once for all” sacrifice he obtained “eternal redemption” (9:12). In his perfect life and death, Jesus both fulfilled the requirements of the sacrificial system and abolished it, substituting his own perfect obedience (10:8–9). No further sacrifice for sin is necessary or possible (10:18, 26). His “new covenant” supersedes the old and makes it “obsolete” (8:13).

Although the atonement is sufficient for all, it must be appropriated in order to be effective for any. Christ’s sacrifice “effectually cleanses in heart and conscience those who embrace Christ as their high priest.”⁶ We must identify ourselves with the one who identified himself with us in order to receive the benefits of his work.

One verse may suggest that people receive the benefits of the atonement through participation in Christ: “For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (3:14). H. Attridge interprets *metochoi* as “participants” in Christ.⁷ Most commentators, however, understand it to mean “partners” of Christ. F. F. Bruce says this phrase probably does not mean participating in Christ, as in Paul’s expression “in Christ,” but rather participating with Christ in his heavenly kingdom.⁸ The word *metochoi* is used in the sense of companions in 1:9, partners or participants in 3:1 (“partners in a heavenly calling”) and participants in 6:4 (“shared in the Holy Spirit”) and 12:8 (“discipline in which all children share”). The evidence is not conclusive for either interpretation. If participation in Christ is intended here, it is a minor emphasis in the epistle, which focuses more on representation, identification and imitation than on participation to describe the relationship between Christ and believers.

The “basic teaching” identified by the author in 6:1–2 gives the clearest indication of how Christ’s salvation is to be appropriated: “repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.” Accepting salvation involves the dual response of repentance (from sin) and faith (toward God). The word “baptisms” probably refers to teaching that distinguished Christian baptism from other ritual washings, perhaps including the baptism of John. Laying on of hands probably refers to the act of confirmation following baptism.⁹ Repentance and faith would thus be followed by baptism and

⁶ Bruce, *Hebrews* lv.

⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews* 117.

⁸ Bruce, *Hebrews* 68. See also W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 87; J. Schattmann, “κοινωνία,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 1.639.

⁹ Attridge, *Hebrews* 164.

confirmation. Commentators have noticed how little in this list is specifically Christian. It illustrates the Jewish basis of Christian proclamation.¹⁰

The faith mentioned here is not specifically said to be faith in Christ, but faith in God would mean faith in the Son through whom God spoke and through whom he provided redemption. The author underscores the necessity of faith by drawing a parallel with the exodus generation. That generation also received the “good news,” but it failed to benefit them because “they were not united by faith with those who listened” (4:2) or “it did not meet with faith in those who listened” (NRSV mg.). At least three interpretations for this verse have been suggested: (1) The exodus generation did not appropriate the good news by faith; (2) they did not respond with the same faith as those who believed God’s promise (Caleb and Joshua); (3) they did not respond with the same faith as believers of the new covenant, who do listen to God’s promise.¹¹ In any case a response of faith, which involves believing and acting on God’s promise, is necessary to appropriate the salvation offered in Christ.

The faith that appropriates salvation is closely tied to obedience. In fact Hebrews sees no saving faith apart from obedience. The word for “obey” (*hypokaō*) occurs only three times in the book, but at least two of those instances are theologically critical. In 5:8–9 the author declares that although Jesus was a Son “he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Jesus’ obedience was necessary in order for him to become the source of salvation, and that salvation is granted to those who obey him. The occurrence of “obey” where we might expect to find “believe in” underscores the close connection in this epistle between faith and obedience. Similarly in 11:8 Abraham demonstrates his faith by obeying God’s call to leave his home and journey to the promised land. As Bruce comments: “There is something appropriate in the fact that the salvation which was procured by the obedience of the Redeemer should be made available to the obedience of the redeemed.”¹²

II. SALVATION AS ESCHATOLOGICAL

Salvation in Hebrews has an eschatological character. It must be understood against the background of the concept of the two ages: this age, and the age to come. The writer shares the eschatological perspective of the synoptics: The kingdom of God has broken into history in the person of Jesus, inaugurating the age to come without destroying the present age. While the consummation is yet in the future, believers are even now “receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28). They have “tasted . . . the powers of the

¹⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews* 112; Attridge, *Hebrews* 163.

¹¹ For the first interpretation see Bruce, *Hebrews* 73; for the second see Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 93 nn.; for the third see Attridge, *Hebrews* 125–126.

¹² Bruce, *Hebrews* 105.

age to come” (6:5), which are at work in the present. The author describes the coming age as, literally, the time of the new order (9:10). The “coming world,” unlike the present one, will be subject to human beings (2:5, 8). Believers now can see in the exaltation of Christ a preview of that future state (2:9).¹³

Thus the epistle has a tension between realized and future eschatology: “Hebrews recognizes the present as the time of eschatological fulfillment (realized eschatology), while the consummation awaits the second coming of Christ.”¹⁴ The writer seems to see the consummation as near at hand. Writer and audience are living in “these last days” (1:2) and the “end of the age” (9:26). God will act in “a very little while” (10:37), and those in the writer’s audience are to live out their faith as they “see the Day approaching” (10:25). The expectation of coming judgment pervades the epistle, particularly in the warnings about apostasy (e.g. 10:26–31). Although “the Lord will judge his people” (10:30), the writer reassures the audience that Jesus will come again “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (9:28).

The dualism of Hebrews has often been read as a Hellenistic or gnostic dualism of earthly and heavenly realities. While a Hellenistic influence is certainly possible, the primary dualism of the epistle is the eschatological dualism of the two ages.¹⁵ Its images of salvation, including the idea of rest and the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries, are found in much Jewish apocalyptic literature.¹⁶ Even the discussion of the heavenly tabernacle (8:1–5) is firmly grounded in the context of salvation history (8:6–13). For the author of Hebrews, “[the] real has come to men in the historical life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. History has become the medium of life eternal.”¹⁷

The concept of faith in Hebrews is also eschatological. The description of faith in 11:1 as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” is often interpreted as two different affirmations—hope in God’s future blessings and the belief in invisible (perhaps Platonic) heavenly realities.¹⁸ This description of faith, however, is really a single affirmation of the author’s already/not-yet eschatological conviction. Faith looks forward with confidence to the consummation of God’s promise in the age to come, which influences the present powerfully but invisibly. The completion of God’s promise is sure, but it is not yet seen. The heavenly realities that can be experienced in the present by faith are a foretaste of the complete fulfillment to come.

¹³ J. J. Scott, Jr., has pointed out the eschatological character of Jesus’ role as *archēgos*: “[Calling] Jesus the ‘archēgos of salvation’ is equivalent to hailing him as the ‘archēgos of the new age’” (“*Archēgos* in the Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *JETS* 29/1 [March 1986] 50).

¹⁴ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 575.

¹⁵ See *ibid.* 572–577.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Hebrews* lv; Attridge, *Hebrews* 28.

¹⁷ Ladd, *Theology* 574.

¹⁸ For example see Attridge, *Hebrews*: “[It] is clear that the first part of the definition relates to the attainment of hoped-for goals, the second to the perception of imperceptible realities” (p. 308). The first affirmation is “eschatological” (p. 310), while the perception of “eternal . . . realities” has “Platonic overtones” (p. 311). See also R. Bultmann, “πιστεύω,” *TDNT* 6.207.

The epistle's imagery of pilgrimage is appropriate in this eschatological framework. E. Käsemann describes the character of revelation in Hebrews as follows:

[The] Logos grants no final revelation. It calls to a way, the goal of which it points out by way of promise, and which can only be reached in union with the Logos and its promise. . . . Only obedience that achieves this wandering beneath and together with the Word to the end is evidence that acceptance of the Word has actually occurred. The basic presupposition of our text is that one possesses the εὐαγγέλιον on earth only as ἐπαγγελία. But then it follows that the form of existence in time appropriate to the recipient of the revelation can only be that of wandering.¹⁹

While Käsemann overstates the future character of revelation—particularly in light of Hebrews' strong emphasis on the ultimate nature of the revelation in Christ—he does express the necessary relationship between promise and pilgrimage that structures the soteriology of the epistle. Faith is the motive power of God's pilgrim people:

Faith is both an openness to the future, which is given expression in obedient trust in the God who has promised, and a present grasp upon truth now invisible but certain because it is grounded in the word of promise. . . . The faith the writer commends to his audience is a confident reliance upon the future, which makes possible responsible action in the present in the light of that confidence. This distinctly eschatological understanding of faith is the corollary of the motif of pilgrimage.²⁰

It is fitting in this eschatological perspective that the words for "salvation" are used in Hebrews with past, present and future senses. Salvation has already been "founded" or "pioneered" by Jesus (2:10). The epistle's audience has shown the reality of that past salvation in their own lives by demonstrating "things that belong to salvation"—namely, love and service to the saints (6:9–10). Through his ongoing work of intercession, Jesus "is able for all time to save (or "able to save completely," NRSV mg.) those who approach God through him" in the present (7:25). But final salvation must await the return of Christ, who will "appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (9:28).

III. SALVATION AS PILGRIMAGE AND WORSHIP

The two primary images of salvation in Hebrews are the pilgrimage of faith and entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. But another concept is prior to and foundational to both: that of approaching or drawing near to God. The language of approach is used for humanity's relationship to God in the OT. For example, in Isa 29:13 the Lord says, "[These] people draw near with

¹⁹ E. Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 19.

²⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* cxlix. Osborne describes salvation in Hebrews as "the eschatological possession of a forward-looking faith" ("Soteriology" 158).

their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.” Zephaniah prophesied against Jerusalem because “it had not drawn near to its God” (Zeph 3:2). In Hebrews, approaching God refers to “the relationship with God through Christ that displaces the cult of the old order.”²¹

The word used for “approach” or “draw near” is generally *proserchomai* (Heb 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22) but sometimes *engizō* (7:19; 10:25). The term *proserchomai* has a cultic context. It is used in the LXX for the people or the priest approaching God (Exod 16:9; Lev 9:7–8).²² The word *engizō* in Hebrews and the general epistles usually refers to the return of Christ and the end of history. Thus it almost always refers to “the drawing near of God and of his salvation to men. Only Heb. 7:19 and Jas. 4:8 speak of a responsive drawing near of man to God.”²³ Hebrews uses the language of approach to describe worship (Heb 10:1) and to express humanity’s relationship with God: “[Whoever] would approach him must believe that he exists” (11:6). The coming of the new covenant means that people can now freely approach God through Christ (7:25) and through the “better hope” he brings (7:19).

We can fully appreciate the radical freedom of the access to God proclaimed in Hebrews only if we realize the difficulty of access under the old covenant. At Mount Sinai, God declared: “Moses alone shall come near the Lord; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him” (Exod 24:2). Later, when the tabernacle had been established, Aaron’s sons died when they “drew near” to God inappropriately (Lev 16:1). The structure of the tabernacle, with its Holy Place and Most Holy Place, was designed to remind the Israelites of the utter holiness of God and their own separation from God because of their sin. The Day-of-Atonement ritual provided that only the high priest could approach the presence of God in the Most Holy Place and only once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people (16:2, 34).

For the author of Hebrews the good news of the gospel is summed up in the extraordinary invitation of Heb 4:16: “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Now all believers are welcomed into the very presence of God. The climax of the book occurs in 10:19–22, when the author expresses the significance of Christ’s high-priestly work of sacrifice and intercession in a similar invitation: “Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

²¹ Attridge, *Hebrews* 204.

²² W. Mundle, “ἐρχομαι,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 1.322; see also J. Schneider, “ἐρχομαι,” *TDNT* 2.684.

²³ W. Bauder and H.-G. Link, “ἐγγύς,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2.55.

Thus salvation in Hebrews means approaching God. The opposite of approaching God is having an “evil, unbelieving heart that turns away [literally, “withdrawing”] from the living God” (3:12). To withdraw is to become one of “those who shrink back and so are lost” (10:39). The idea of turning away is also rooted in the OT (Deut 17:17; 29:18; 30:17). Faith approaches God (Heb 11:6); unbelief withdraws from him (3:12). Approaching God has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The invitations of 4:16 and 10:22 express the vertical dimension of immediate access to the presence of God through worship and prayer. The horizontal dimension is that of a journey toward the eschatological goal. Believers “come to” Mount Zion and experience some of its benefits in the present by faith (12:18, 22), even as the eschatological day is also “approaching” them (10:25). In what follows, I will look first at the aspect of pilgrimage and then at the entrance into the sanctuary.

Believers are on a pilgrimage of faith toward the consummation of God’s promise. As R. Bultmann expresses it:

The eschatological Congregation really no longer belongs to the perishing world. Its members have no home here; their *πολίτευμα* (citizenship) is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), their City is the one that is to come (Heb. 13:14). Here, in this world, they are away from home on a pilgrimage. . . . The thing to do, then, is “to gird up one’s loins” for the pilgrimage.²⁴

Like the exodus generation, or Lot and his family, Christians are fugitives or refugees (Heb 6:18) who have been rescued by God and who are warned not to turn back to their own destruction (10:39). They are running a race for which they need endurance and discipline (12:1–2). They are to imitate the faith of the patriarchs and the OT saints who considered themselves “strangers and foreigners on the earth” who were “seeking a homeland” (11:13–14). They are to follow the example of Jesus and go “outside the camp” to suffer for his sake (13:13).²⁵

The experience of the exodus generation is seen as a type of the Christian life (3:7–4:11). They heard the good news (4:2) and received God’s promise. They journeyed toward final salvation in the form of entrance into the promised land and the experience of Sabbath rest. The land is presented as a resting place in Deut 12:9; Josh 21:44.²⁶ The exodus generation failed to enter God’s rest, but the author understands Psalm 95 to mean that God’s promise of rest is still open (Heb 4:9). Osborne notes that the concept of Sabbath rest was interpreted in Jewish tradition to refer to the world to come. In Hebrews it is “an eschatological concept which implies that the believer proleptically shares the ‘rest of God,’ i.e., the kingdom blessings of peace and security promised for the ‘last days.’”²⁷

²⁴ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951–55) 1.100.

²⁵ Bruce interprets the “camp” as “the established fellowship and ordinances of Judaism” (*Hebrews* 403), while Attridge interprets it as the “realm of security and traditional holiness, however that is grounded or understood” (*Hebrews* 399).

²⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews* 126.

²⁷ Osborne, “Soteriology” 148.

The idea of salvation as inheritance is part of this typology (1:14; 9:15). It fits the already/not-yet perspective of the epistle: Believers are “heirs of the promise” (6:17), so they have a new status in the present and can live in light of that status, but their possession of the inheritance awaits the future consummation (6:12). The idea of the promised land as an inheritance occurs throughout Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut 26:1).²⁸

Believers do not go on pilgrimage as isolated individuals. The pilgrimage motif points out the corporate aspect of salvation: “Only in union with Christ’s companions is there life, faith, and progress on the individual’s way of wandering. As soon as a person is no longer fully conscious of membership and begins to be isolated from the people of God, that person must also have left the promise behind and abandoned the goal.”²⁹

Pilgrims of faith acknowledge that they have no “lasting city,” but they seek “the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14; cf. 11:10, 16). For Christians the goal of pilgrimage is not Mount Sinai but Mount Zion: “[You] have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a better covenant” (12:22–24). This is eschatological language, but the perfect tense of “have come” suggests that believers can experience a foretaste of the eschatological salvation in their present fellowship with one another and with God:

[The] new Jerusalem has not yet come down to men, but in the spiritual realm they already have access to it. They have become fellow-citizens with Abraham of that well-founded city for which he looked; it is the city or commonwealth which comprises the whole family of faith, God’s true dwelling-place. . . . [The] privileges of its citizenship are already enjoyed by faith.³⁰

Hebrews expresses the vertical dimension of salvation in terms of entrance into the sanctuary. The sanctuary is specifically that of the tabernacle, not the temple. God does not simply call believers to pilgrimage. He goes with them on their journey and gives them access to his presence: “What we find in 4:16 is a bold extension of the language of worship. . . . [The] high priestly ministry of Jesus has achieved for the people of the new covenant what Israel never enjoyed, namely, *immediate access to God* and the freedom to draw near to him continually.”³¹

Believers receive access to God’s presence because of the person and work of Christ. In his own person he has provided a “new and living way” to God (10:20). “He is the unique Mediator between God and man because He combines Godhead and manhood perfectly in His own person; in Him God draws

²⁸ Osborne believes that “the word ‘promise’ provides a bridge between eschatology and soteriology.” He concludes that “[salvation in Hebrews] must be understood as the present possession of a future inheritance” (“Soteriology” 154, 155).

²⁹ Käsemann, *Wandering* 21; see also Attridge, *Hebrews* 128.

³⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews* 375.

³¹ Lane, *Call to Commitment* 77.

near to men and in Him men may draw near to God, with the assurance of constant and immediate access."³² In his high-priestly role, he makes intercession for believers' sins (7:25). This concept is more than a metaphor for the efficacy of his death. It is his present, ongoing work for believers: "Christ's intercessory activity, which is always effective because of his once-for-all work, is a genuinely high priestly act. As the one who 'always lives' in the present, Christ intercedes for us no longer simply in a collective sense as he did in his unique atoning death; now he intercedes in every moment for each individual."³³

Hebrews nowhere specifically develops the concept of the priesthood of all believers, but much of the author's language implies it. Salvation is presented in the context of access to God. Believers come into God's presence with spiritual conditions that parallel the external washings and sprinklings performed by the high priest in the Day-of-Atonement ritual (10:22; cf. Leviticus 16). Believers have "an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat" (Heb 13:10). They can "offer to God an acceptable worship" (12:28).³⁴ And they can offer to him sacrifices of praise and good works (13:15–16).

The most comprehensive terms for salvation in Hebrews are sanctification (*hagiazō*) and perfection (*teleioō*). Both are appropriate to the image of salvation as approaching God. The basic meaning of sanctification in Hebrews is to be set apart for divine service.³⁵ The term *hagiazō* is used in the LXX for sanctifying priests.³⁶ Since sin is defilement (9:13), human beings need to be sanctified in order to approach God. Believers are sanctified by Jesus (2:11) through his blood (13:12) and on the basis of the offering of his body once for all (10:10). They have received not only an outward cleansing but also an inward cleansing of the conscience (9:13–14).

Like salvation, sanctification has both past and future senses. The past sense refers to Christ's completed work, the positional sanctification that has been given to believers (10:10, 29; 13:12). The future sense refers to the ethical sanctification that the believers themselves are to pursue (12:14). Hebrews balances the past accomplishment and present appropriation of sanctification: Christ's single act has "perpetual effects," but "the appropriation of the enduring effects of Christ's act is an ongoing present reality."³⁷ Thus while sanctification has a cultic or positional basis it also has moral signifi-

³² Bruce, *Hebrews* 153–154.

³³ Cullmann, *Christology* 102. He adds: "The idea that Christ intercedes for us also in the present is Christologically very important and ought to be given a more central place also in systematic theology than is usually the case" (pp. 102–103). Bruce observes that Christ's intercession is also described in Rom 8:34; 1 John 2:1–2. He relates this work of Christ to the servant of Isaiah 53 who makes "intercession for the transgressors" (*Hebrews* liv, 154).

³⁴ Attridge identifies this as a cultic term (*Hebrews* 383).

³⁵ R. E. O. White, "Sanctification," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 969.

³⁶ C. Brown, "ἅγιος," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2.232.

³⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews* 280–281.

cance: “If atonement is the basis of the Christian life, *ἀγιασμός* is the moral form which develops out of it and without which there can be no vision of Christ.”³⁸ The purpose of sanctification is that in the end believers might share in the holiness of God (12:10).³⁹

The concept of perfection (*teleioō*) overlaps considerably with that of sanctification. The word group for perfection occurs in Hebrews with the greatest frequency of any book in the NT. It comes from a cultic context and means to consecrate or sanctify someone so that person can come before God. The OT believers could not reach this perfection, which was given by Christ (11:40; 10:14). But now they can share in it (12:23).⁴⁰ In Hebrews both Jesus and believers are said to be perfect. Jesus was “made perfect” by learning obedience through suffering (5:9). By his offering of himself he “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14).

The expression “to make perfect” is the same used in the Pentateuch for consecrating a priest to his office.⁴¹ Jesus’ obedience eternally qualified him to come before God as high priest (Heb 5:8–9; 7:28). “By his high-priestly work . . . before God Christ has once and for all ‘qualified’ those for whom He acts to come directly before God . . . in the heavenly sanctuary as men whose sin is expiated.”⁴² Cullmann observes that one aspect of Jesus’ function as high priest is to “bring humanity to its ‘perfection.’” He notes that the term *teleios* refers both to perfection and to completion; it has both cultic and moral significance. Jesus himself was made perfect for his role as high priest through the course of his life, and he makes believers perfect.⁴³

Like sanctification, perfection has both past and future senses. Jesus gave believers a perfect standing by the atonement he accomplished (10:14). But the audience still must “go on toward perfection” (6:1), just as they must pursue sanctification. Perfection thus lies at the goal of their pilgrimage.⁴⁴ Their lives should show a growing holiness that reflects the access to God that they have been given. In this process they are to look to Jesus, the “perfecter of our faith” (12:2).

The images of salvation as pilgrimage and as worship correspond with the concepts of Jesus as *archēgos* and as *prodromos*. Believers on the pilgrimage of faith can look to the leadership of Jesus as the *archēgos* (“champion, pioneer”) of their salvation (2:10; 12:2). In the LXX the term is used for the political or military leader of the people.⁴⁵ It is not used of Moses of Joshua but of leaders like Jephthah in Judg 11:6 who were elected by the

³⁸ O. Procksch, “*ἅγιος*,” *TDNT* 1.113.

³⁹ H. Seebass, “*ἅγιος*,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2.230.

⁴⁰ R. Schippers, “*τέλος*,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2.63.

⁴¹ Lane, *Call to Commitment* 48.

⁴² G. Dellling, “*τέλος*,” *TDNT* 8.83.

⁴³ Cullmann, *Christology* 92–93.

⁴⁴ McKnight observes: “The language of perfection in Hebrews speaks of bringing believers to their intended goal as worshipers who draw near to God as an obedient people and is thus very close to the notion of glorification (cf. esp. 12:2)” (“Warning Passages” 57).

⁴⁵ G. Dellling, “*ἄρχω*,” *TDNT* 1.487.

people in time of need.⁴⁶ Jesus is the *archēgos* of believers in two senses: (1) He secures their salvation by acting as their champion as David did for the Israelites when he defeated Goliath.⁴⁷ (2) He leads believers on the path of salvation as Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land. His leadership makes possible the successful journey of those who follow him.⁴⁸

Believers who want to enter the sanctuary can look to Jesus who has entered as “a forerunner [*prodromos*] on our behalf” (6:20). As the forerunner of believers, Christ is more than a representative and an example to follow. He also enables and guarantees the access of those who follow him. Cullmann argues that “by entering the ‘inner shrine behind the curtain’ as ‘forerunner’, he draws with him those who are his into his *resurrection* and its consequences.” He compares this concept in Hebrews to Paul’s idea that Jesus has become the “firstborn of the dead.”⁴⁹ Believers’ hope in Jesus as their forerunner is their anchor for a turbulent journey, a lifeline into the presence of God that will eventually bring them to God’s rest (6:18–20).

IV. RESULTS OF SALVATION

As in Paul’s epistles, soteriology in Hebrews is the foundation for ethics. Throughout the epistle the author calls the audience to move on to maturity (6:1) and live out their salvation through their love and service to the saints (6:9–10). The salvation described in chaps. 1–10 and exemplified in chap. 11 provides the foundation for the ethical exhortations of chaps. 12–13. The author urges the audience to endure persecution patiently and thereby follow the example of Christ (12:3–4; 13:13), regard trials as God’s discipline (12:7), pursue peace and holiness (12:14), avoid bitterness and immorality (12:15–16), show mutual love and hospitality (13:1–2), minister to those under persecution (13:3), be faithful in marriage (13:4), reject materialism (13:5), submit to their leaders (13:7, 17), hold to sound teaching (13:9), do good and share (13:16), and worship continually (13:15).

In a negative comparison with Paul, Bultmann claims that Hebrews does not make the connection between believers’ standing in Christ (the sanctification they have been given) and their ethical conduct (the sanctification they are to strive for):

Because the dialectic relationship between imperative and indicative has been lost from sight, salvation is really only future, and the present simply stands under God’s demand; insofar as the present is a “between,” it is only a between-

⁴⁶ L. Coenen, “ἀρχή,” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 1.165.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Call to Commitment* 47–48, 51.

⁴⁸ See Bruce, *Hebrews* 43. Attridge speculates that the author of Hebrews intends in 4:8 to make a comparison between Joshua and Jesus as the *archēgos* of the old and new covenants (*Hebrews*, 87, 130). Scott summarizes the range of meanings of *archēgos*: “Given its full range of meaning, the word designates an individual who opened the way into a new area for others to follow, founded the city in which they dwelt, gave his name to the community, fought its battles and secured the victory, and then remained as the leader-ruler-hero of his people” (“*Archēgos*” 52).

⁴⁹ Cullmann, *Christology* 101. See also O. Bauernfeind, “τρέγων,” *TDNT* 8.234.

time, an interval that will last for a little while longer, in which by his “endurance” the believer must hold out.⁵⁰

It is true that Hebrews does not lay out in detail the relationship between indicative and imperative. The author’s concern is more pastoral—to write a “word of exhortation” (13:22) to encourage those who are being tempted to go back on their confession. For believers in the midst of a “struggle against sin” (12:4) that may lead to martyrdom, salvation may very well seem to be primarily a future reality. Nevertheless the remarkable insight of Hebrews is that salvation is also to be found in the present in believers’ immediate ongoing access to the presence of God, which Bultmann dismisses by saying that “prayer is probably meant, after all.”⁵¹

The clearest instance of the relationship between indicative and imperative occurs in this context of access to God. In 10:19–25 the author bases ethical exhortations on the foundation of the completed atonement that has granted believers access to God: “Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . let us approach with a true heart. . . . Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope. . . . And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Indicative and imperative are related in the person and work of Jesus the high priest. Because his atonement has qualified believers to stand before God, and because his intercession gives them immediate ongoing access to God in worship and prayer, believers have all the resources they need to live the life of faith. As Lane comments: “The solidarity of the heavenly high priest with the community in its weakness provides a strong motivation for earnest prayer.”⁵²

Hebrews thus bases its ethical imperatives on both objective and subjective factors. Access to God’s presence has been provided through Christ’s sacrifice (10:19), Jesus has entered the sanctuary as the forerunner of believers (6:20), he serves as believers’ high priest in God’s presence (4:14, 16), and he gives them ongoing help and care (2:18; 13:5–6). Believers themselves possess the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4) and have experienced the powers of the age to come (6:5), they have God’s law written on their hearts (8:10; 10:16) and the certainty of God’s promise (6:17–18), they have been set free from the fear of death (2:14–15) and been purified from dead works (9:14), and they can take encouragement from the example of Christ and others (12:1–3; 13:7) as well as from one another (10:24–25). Finally believers are to exercise faith (10:39; 11:6) and rely on God’s grace (13:9), trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also equip them to do his will (13:20–21).

Imperative thus grows out of indicative as one footstep follows another upon the path. E. Schweizer believes that the image of Christ as high priest and forerunner not only gives a picture of salvation but also “gives the initial steps for discipleship”:

In the figure of the high priest the assertion of the sacrificial death “for us” is connected with that of his going on “before us.” . . . This excludes both a

⁵⁰ Bultmann, *Theology* 2.168.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 166.

⁵² Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8 123; see also p. 115.

sacrifice theory that leaves the individual completely passive, and the misunderstanding of the high priest as a mere model that we must imitate. . . . [Hebrews] already presupposes a path that God has traveled with his people to Christ. This path continues in the church until the last “coming” of “the Day drawing near” and its judge.⁵³

The dynamic picture of salvation in Hebrews includes a strong element of assurance, but it does not affirm eternal security. The assurance of believers has both an objective and a subjective component: “[Having] been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:9). The assurance of believers is based first of all on Christ’s sacrifice, which is sufficient to provide eternal redemption (9:11–12). Bruce observes that Jesus provides eternal salvation (5:10), eternal redemption (9:12), an eternal inheritance (9:15), and an eternal covenant (13:20) because these are “based on the sacrifice of Christ, once for all accomplished, never to be repeated, and permanently valid.”⁵⁴ Believers also have the certainty of God’s promise, which he affirmed with an oath (6:17–18). They know that God is faithful in keeping his promise (10:23; 11:11), and they can look to the exaltation of Christ as evidence that he will fulfill his promise to humanity (2:8–9). But believers also have a responsibility in assurance: “And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:11–12).

Final salvation is conditional upon the exercise of an obedient faith that maintains one’s confession and lives by God’s promise. Bultmann argues that faith in Hebrews means “acceptance of the missionary message,” then trust, “but above all it means faithfulness, fidelity, . . . and hope.”⁵⁵ Hebrews expresses salvation in conditional statements: Believers are God’s house “if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope” (3:6), and they have become partners of Christ “if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (3:14). The exodus generation failed to enter the promised land because of unbelief (3:18), which is equated with disobedience (4:6). Like the exodus generation, the writer’s audience can fall through disobedience (4:6, 11). They need “endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (10:36).

Conditional security is consistent with the epistle’s emphasis on the critical role of faith in salvation: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6). In the context of the pilgrimage, the author directs believers to imitate “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). In the context of entering the sanctuary, the author urges the audience to “approach with a true heart in full assurance of

⁵³ E. Schweizer, *A Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 106–108.

⁵⁴ Bruce, *Hebrews* 105.

⁵⁵ Bultmann, *Theology* 2.167. Similarly McKnight observes: “Thus, for the author, salvation, though experienced now in its inaugurated form, is something reserved for God’s persevering people until the return of Jesus Christ (9:29)” (“Warning Passages” 58).

faith” (10:22). Faith in God’s promise (fulfilled in Christ but yet to be consummated) enables the believe to enter the sanctuary and gain strength for the pilgrimage.

The centrality of faith explains why an “evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12) is so dangerous. Such an attitude turns believers away from God (3:12). They can be “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13) and “drift away” from the gospel (2:1). Like Esau they can sell their birthright for immorality and place themselves beyond repentance (12:16–17). Such an attitude, persisted in, can lead to actual apostasy. Those who “willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth” will find that “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment,” because they have “spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace” (10:26–27, 29). People who have reached this point cannot be restored: “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt” (6:4–6).

The people in question have had experiences of the gospel that are available only to believers.⁵⁶ Yet they have willfully rejected the one who redeemed them. The aorist of “fallen away” indicates a “decisive moment of commitment to apostasy.” They have rejected Christ, the only foundation, the “only basis upon which repentance can be extended.”⁵⁷ As Attridge notes: “Those who reject this necessary presupposition of repentance simply, and virtually by definition, cannot repent.”⁵⁸

Despite these exhortations to faithfulness and warnings against unfaithfulness, Hebrews does not base the believer’s assurance on works. The basis of ongoing assurance is Christ’s high-priestly work of intercession. The author describes final salvation as a consequence of Christ’s permanent priesthood: “[He] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). The need for intercession expressed here runs contrary to the view that the justification of believers covers all past, present and future sins.⁵⁹ Because they have such a high priest, believers can have confidence to enter God’s presence and can maintain their confession without wavering (10:21–23). They have a hope

⁵⁶ See Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 141; Attridge, *Hebrews* 169–170. The argument is sometimes advanced that the word “tasted” (*geusamenous*) means here that these people have sampled the gifts of salvation without fully experiencing them. The author’s use of *geuomai* in 2:9, however, refers to a definitive experience: “But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste [*geusētai*] death for everyone.” See the discussion in McKnight, “Warning Passages” 46–48.

⁵⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* 142.

⁵⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews* 169.

⁵⁹ See for example Ladd, *Theology* 449.

that is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (6:19–20). Thus despite the author’s warnings “the major soteriological purpose of the epistle is not warning but encouragement.”⁶⁰

V. CONCLUSION

Although no book in the NT places more emphasis on the once-for-all nature of Christ’s sacrifice, Hebrews views salvation as dynamic and relational rather than static and purely juridical. It is not only an event but also a process. It has both objective and subjective aspects: It is made possible by Christ’s high-priestly work of sacrifice and intercession, and it is appropriated by believers’ faith exercised in prayer and perseverance.

Hebrews reminds the people of God that they are pilgrims in a hostile world who are to follow their leader and champion and not settle down into compromise. It calls believers to walk closely with Christ in the present as they look forward to his coming. This view of salvation as pilgrimage is particularly relevant to the modern Church, which finds itself in an increasingly hostile world. V. Eller believes that pilgrimage or “caravaning” is the appropriate model for the lifestyle of the contemporary Church.⁶¹ Hebrews calls believers to be in the world but not of it. They must maintain their confession in the midst of the world without being drawn away by the world. Salvation in Hebrews has a corporate context and a forward-looking perspective that corrects an evangelical overemphasis on individual faith and the past conversion event. It is an antidote not only to complacent “at-homeness” in the world but also to the “heavenly-minded” attitude that refuses to recognize the tough realities of this life. Both as a people and as individuals, believers have not arrived. They are still on the journey.

Hebrews speaks to the sense of incompleteness felt at some times by all reflective Christians. We have received the promise and have experienced the powers of the age to come, but we have no abiding city in this age. The epistle encourages us to take advantage of our high privilege of entering the presence of God as individuals and as a people. In our personal and corporate lives we should pursue the sanctification to which we have been called. For the author of Hebrews the essence of salvation is worship. Hebrews calls us to draw near to God in fellowship with one another as we journey to the city that is to come, to the eschatological day when all God’s promises will realized.

⁶⁰ Osborne, “Soteriology” 153.

⁶¹ V. Eller, *The Outward Bound: Caravaning as the Style of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).