

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART V

MOSES AS A PREPARATION FOR JESUS

I. Chapter 3 and the next section begins with a connection to the idea that we are brothers of Christ, who is the full Son of God.

A. He begins by addressing the readers as "holy brothers," fulfilling the theme of the last section, i.e., that Jesus as the faithful high priest made us all in the family of God and that His holiness is conferred upon us. See, e.g., Rom. 14:10-21, 1 Cor. 8:11-15; 2 Thess. 3:15; 1 John 3:10-17.

- The word "holy" (agioi, sancti in Latin in Greek) could as a noun also mean saints, and is a common way of St. Paul in referring to the faithful people of God. See, e.g., Rom. 15:25-26. At other times, St. Paul refers to sainthood as something we are called to. See Romans 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:18. And likewise here the letter says that we are united above all else in this "heavenly calling."

- The term "heavenly calling" likely means both a calling from heaven from heaven and a calling to heaven. It basically emphasizes the crucial nature of the call to discipleship. If one is to be loyal and dedicated even to an earthly kingdom, surely all the more to a divine one.

B. The letter then refers to Jesus as "the apostle and high priest of our confession."

- This section n Moses will deal more with Jesus as the great apostle (i.e., one who is sent forth), while the next section will describe Jesus as the great high priest accomplishing what the Levitical priesthood could only signify.

- Moses was not a high priest; rather, his brother Aaron received that office, although Moses was certainly involved in conveying it. But more than any other Old Testament figure, except possibly Abraham was sent forth to save God's people.

- The letter uses a term ordinary reserved for the ones Jesus sent forth. The idea is that Jesus was also sent forth by the Father, although He is also God as the passage will indicate. Thus, Jesus gives us the model of ministry and apostleship.

C. The letter states how it is that Moses is a model of fidelity, but Jesus is greater still.

1. Moses was honored as the faithful prophet and leader of God above all else. See, e.g., Duet. 34:10-12.

- Thus this letter quotes a passage that indicates how Moses spoke to God face to face, not through indirect and occasion means such as visions, as He did with the later prophets. And thus, Moses was placed in charge of God's household, i.e., His people. See Num. 12:5-7. The prophets were God's spokesmen; Moses was greater than they.

2. That letter argues that the honor given to Moses should be a preparation for the honor given to Jesus. See, e.g., John 6:32-33. Given that Jesus expounded on the Law as Moses did, see, e.g., Matt. 5-7, and even overrode the Mosaic Law at time, see, e.g., Mark 10:1-12, people may have been inclined to think of Jesus as a new Moses. This section will present Him as one of whom Moses was an image.

3. The letter goes onto say that Moses was merely a steward put in charge of God's house; Jesus is the house itself.

- The idea is that the Chosen People would sometimes be called the house of God. As the letter indicates now the Church, comprising God's new Chosen People, is the house of God. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 3:9; Eph. 2:19-20; 1 Tim. 3:15. And the essence of that house is Jesus, for the Church is also the Body of Christ. See 1 Cor. 12:27-31. The analogy of the House or God, like that of the Body of Christ, indicates that each one has a special role and brings glory to all.

- Therefore, Moses only prepared the way for Christ, who would give us the fullness of God's favor. Moses witnessed in partial signs, laws, and rituals what Jesus would make manifest in His life, death, and Resurrection.

D. But the letter takes that statement further. It says that Jesus is greater than Moses as the builder of the house; and it then identifies God as the builder, identifying Jesus with God.

- The letter then draws also a certain distinction saying God put Jesus over the house as a son. The idea is that there is still a distinction between God the Father and God the Son, even though they are both God. The language that would describe God as Three Divine Persons with One Divine Nature would come later, in the third and fourth centuries. But the truth is already expressed here.

II. The letter then goes onto the moral section, exhorting the faithful to place confidence in Christ, hold fast to the hope of eternal life, and therefore retain our places in the household of God.

A. In this context, it expounds on Psalm 95 and applies it by analogy to the pilgrimage of Christian life.

1. Psalm 95 begins as a praise of God and call to worship Him, but then proceeds onto a warning not to lose trust in God, as the ancient Israelites did when they were in the desert after being freed from slavery in Egypt. The letter quotes from that warning.

2. Psalm 95, which is the first option for the first part of the Divine Office that priests, deacons, and religious sisters take vows to pray, begins with a glorious call to rejoice in God's presence.

- It reflects upon God as the never-changing rock of salvation, who always provides for His people.

- It goes onto to praise God's might as "the king over all the gods." In this case gods probably means angels or the forces of nature, for the Psalm then praises God as alone being able to create the world.

- It then goes back to the loving care of God as a shepherd for His people, an image that Jesus would take up.

3. However, the Psalm also contains a warning that infidelity will result in wandering or other punishment, as the wandering of the people in the desert indicates.

- The Psalm refers to three of the ten times that the People of God showed a lack of confidence in Him. As the Chosen People were approaching Mount Sinai, there was a shortage of water, and the people started rebelling. God told Moses to strike rock; he did so, and water flowed out. Then, after leaving Mount Sinai the people were supposed to fight the Amalekites in the south of the Promised Land in order to enter it. At that point, they refused, fearing the native peoples. God then said that they would wander for forty years until that generation passed away. On their way back from the Promised Land, they again began to rebel because of the shortage of water. God again told Moses to strike rock. He struck the rock twice, perhaps out of a weak faith and/or frustration. Water flowed forth, but Moses, because he did not show forth God's holiness,

could not himself enter the promised Land. See Ex. 17:1-7; Numbers 13:25-14:38, 20:2-13.

4. Because of this lack of faithfulness, the first generation did not enter the Promised Land. The Psalm contrasts the joyous confidence in God with this punishment at a lack of fidelity.

B. The Letter then draws an analogy between the Promised Land and the final rest that the Christian faithful are called to.

1. The idea was that those who lacked faith that God would guide them in the desert are images of a Christian who loses faith in God.

2. The letter especially focuses on the notion of putting trust in God "today." The idea is that one can forsake God even if one has been with Him and initially placed "first confidence in Him."

3. The letter also calls upon Christians to "exhort one another," the idea being that one does not maintain faith alone.

III. The next section then develops the idea of entering into the "rest" of the promised Land.

A. The section also associates this rest with the Sabbath rest of the seventh day, the completion of creation. See Ex. Gen. 2:2-3; 20:8-11. The idea is that we are progressing to the completion of the new heavens and the new earth. See, e.g., Is. 65:27, 66:22; Rom. 8:20; Rev. 21:1. Like this letter, the explanation for the Temp Commandments that Moses gave to the people just before they entered the Promised Land connected the Sabbath to their freedom. See Duet. 5:12-15.

B. By implication, the Sabbath is therefore meant to be a first promise and image of the life in the new Promised Land. See John Paul II, *Dies Domini* (1998) 26.

C. The letter also argues that the rest of which Psalm 95 speaks could not have been only the rest in the Promised Land, for if such were the case, there would be no application to future generations who would already live in the Promised Land. Because the Psalm was plainly meant to draw a lesson from the desert experience, there must be a greater rest that people are progressing toward.

D. The letter concludes this section with a reflection on the written and personal word of God.

1. The letter begins by pointing out how powerful the word of God is. See, e.g., Ps. 29:3-9, 33:6; Wis. 18:15; Sir. 42:15; Is. 49:2; Eph. 6:17, 1 Pet. 1:23. The idea is that, when one receives the word of God, one's true response to God becomes clear, a response that may have been unclear before.

2. The letter then that Jesus is the full word of God, of which the words that Moses pronounced from Mount Sinai and during the journey in the desert were only preparations. See, e.g., John 1:1-2; Rev. 19:13. He is the fullness of the revelation of God. Catechism 65.