

THE WILDERNESS-SUFFERERS:

A Pastoral Biblical-Theological Study of Suffering from the Book of Hebrews

I. INTRODUCTION: PARANESIS AND EXHORTATION BUILT UPON THE THEOLOGY OF THE AUTHOR

The Apostle Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy that those who want to live a life in Christ Jesus *will* suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). Jesus told his disciples in the context of speaking of the Holy Spirit in the Book of John, that in this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world (John 16:33). For the people of God of any time and place, the Book of Hebrews is eminently practical for the comforting of those who suffer. In fact, the way the author of the Book of Hebrews addresses his concerns to the congregation is with a view to real suffering, and to promote an identity--a *wilderness-suffering* identity in the people. This is so that when they suffer they might think on their present circumstances in light of the eschatological suffering and work of Christ in these last days (Heb. 9:26b-28). In the same way that the Book of Revelation teaches the people of God to raise their eyes by faith upward to see God upon the throne in these last days (cf. Rev. 4-5), so the Book of Hebrews teaches us to think eschatologically about the Person and Work of Christ. The author of the Hebrews teaches the people of God a theology of suffering in his paraneisis, or his exhortations, and the kind of mindset the believer ought to have in the midst of their sufferings in the last days. Dr. R. B. Gaffin, Jr. wrote, "...Hebrews is an exceptionally instructive example of the integration of doctrine and exhortation (life) that in various ways characterizes the entire New Testament."¹ The theology of Hebrews (doctrine) is to exhort the people of God living in the last days to steadfast endurance and to exercise and eschatological faith (life).²

¹ R. B. Gaffin, Jr. "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, pg. 35. Philadelphia, PA: OPC, 1986.

² William Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary on Hebrews 1-8*, pg. c-ci. Word Publishing, 1991. Lane says that the author's "argumentation in the book s to serve exhortation"; "exposition provides an essential foundation for exhortation";

The author is concerned about the people to whom he writes and we can learn a great deal about our own sufferings in light of this book. One way of understanding the purpose of the author of Hebrews is to see how he gets us to think eschatologically on a horizontal plane, while gazing vertically to the superior Person and Work of Christ as our High Priest (Heb. 1:1-4; 2:10-18). Christ is greater than the angels (Heb. 2:5-13); greater than Moses (Heb. 3:1-6); he performed a better sacrifice because he is a greater High Priest (Heb. 5:10; 6:19-7:28; cf. 9:11ff). Those who suffer in manifold ways, can be confident that not only is their faith in the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8), but in their suffering, they can be encouraged that he who was greater in his Person and Work was identified with them, and went before them as *archegon* (Heb. 2:10-18; 12:1-11; cf. Acts 3:15; 5:31).

The Christian life is a race run, according to the author of the Hebrews (Heb. 12:1ff). Believers are not to be “over-realized” in their eschatology. That is, the race believers in Christ run in these last days in the wilderness, as “people on the way” is fraught with difficulties, challenges and pain. The author of Hebrews teaches us to understand our lives as a pilgrim people in the wilderness of suffering and to remember that Christ our High Priest himself served in the wilderness and overcame (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15). In the same way, as believers who run the race with our eyes fixed on the Pioneer (*archegon*) and Perfector of our faith, so we too can persevere during perilous times and overcome. Although the pain and suffering is real and comes to us in manifold ways, God has spoken his sure and precious promises to us through Christ (Heb. 1:1,2). Christ in his High Priestly work has accomplished our salvation and has been offered up as a propitiation for our sins (Heb. 7:27; 9:14,15). Those who would have an “over-realized” eschatology desire for all the fullness of

“parenthesis holds the various sections of discourse together as a unified whole; the dominant motif in Hebrews is parenetic,”

heaven now: fame, riches, absence of pain, rather than understanding that the author to the Hebrews is teaching the people that as Christ identified with us, so we must identify with him; that is, in his suffering (cf. Heb. 2:1-11). Hebrews 2:10 says, “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering” (RSV). Hebrews chapter 2, ends with this hopeful verse in v. 18: “For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (RSV).

The beginning of the book of Hebrews is in the form of a homily that helps us to better understand the author’s word of exhortation (Heb. 13:22) as from the heart of a pastor who has suffered in Christ himself. The book has the elements of an epistle, but overall it is a pastoral theology of suffering. A theology that encourages perseverance in the face of trial, pain, and even apostasy, in light of the superiority of Christ’s Person and Work as our High Priest. We should remember that even Christ asked the question concerning faith and apostasy: “When the Son of Man returns will he find faith on the earth” (Luke 18:8; cf. Heb. 6:4-6). This is to teach us in light of the Book of Hebrews that apostasy is a real and ever-present threat to the Church. Believers must persevere with an eschatological faith that can move mountains, but that acknowledges itself as a faith pioneered, championed and perfected by Christ alone (Heb. 11:1,6; cf. 12:2-4).

The believers to whom the author wrote were greatly disheartened or “sluggish” and losing faith because of the persecution and suffering that they were undergoing (Heb. 5:11; 6:12; 12:3). According to Hebrews 10:32ff, the Christians had “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (RSV). They had joyfully accepted the plundering of their

property, since they knew that they had a better possession and an abiding one. However, they were ready to “throw away their confidence, which has a great reward” (Heb. 10:35) (RSV). They needed endurance just as all believers living in the last days: an endurance which fixes its eschatological focus upon the promises of God (Heb. 10:36). The author is trying to encourage them with the real hope they have in the present by considering the Person and Work as High Priest on their behalf. William Lane wrote concerning the Person and Work of Christ: “...the readers lethargy derives from their failure to grasp the full significance of Christ...Like the changing configurations of a kaleidoscope as it is turned, the writer sees the eternal Son, the incarnate Son, the exalted Son.”³

Just as the Christians addressed in the Book of Hebrews had real hope in what Christ has accomplished in his superior work on behalf of his people, so the same hope is real for the suffering believer who is tempted to give up and to return to an unbelieving way of life. Therefore, we can finish the race as we look to him and his incarnation, better sacrifice, and better priesthood in the context of a better covenant. Christ is our all in all; and he is the end, the eschatological goal of our salvation and faith. As we journey as believers through this life in the Age of the Spirit, may we look to the Book of Hebrews for comfort knowing that he who triumphed on our behalf is able to keep us from falling and will bring us into his Kingdom presence through our faith in him (Heb. 13:20,21; cf. Jude 24).

We will consider the theology of suffering in the Book of Hebrews by reflecting upon the following theological themes and aspects of our hope in the Person and Work of Christ revealed to us in these last days. The theological themes of the Book of Hebrews will exhort us as a pilgrim people, living in the last days while pointing us forward through an eschatological faith to the Last Day when all things will be renewed. First, we will look at

³ Lane, pg. cxxxviii-cxxxix.

how the author of Hebrews describes a “last days people” as wilderness-sufferers so that the people of God may have a correct understanding of our identity in the midst of suffering (Heb. 3:7-4:10); second, we will consider the hope of Christ’s superiority to Angels (Heb. 1:5-14); third, we will consider Christ’s incarnation and work on behalf of his people in his suffering, temptation, sympathy, and being made perfect (Heb. 2:10-18; 4:14-16; 5:7-10)⁴; fourth, we will consider our hope as a wilderness people in Christ’s superior offering of himself (8:1-10:18); and finally, we will conclude with the promises and punishments in the Book of Hebrews.

II. A SUFFERING WILDERNESS COMMUNITY (3:7-4:13)

As the people of God who live in these last days, we should remember that we are a wilderness people who have yet to enter our rest. For the author of Hebrews, suffering is a last days wilderness reality, and this reality should not cause Christ’s people to stumble or be surprised (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12ff). We should understand that in this world of pain and suffering we are only being identified with Christ our Head. This means that we are a pilgrim people on the way to the full inheritance in the Kingdom of God. Just like the saints in the Old Covenant who did not see all the promises of God fulfilled, yet they still believed God by faith, and knew he was able to fulfill his promises and to give them their full inheritance (Heb. 11:6ff; cf. Heb. 4:1-13; Ps. 95:7b-11).

Although we await our rest now according to Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, we persevere by faith, as those who persevered by faith before us (Heb. 12:1). We continue the race in the wilderness because of those witnesses in Christ who have preceded us; knowing that because they have made it, we also shall make it. We persevere to enter the rest and understand that

⁴ These distinctions were made by G. Vos in “The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” from *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by R. B. Gaffin, Jr.

although we do not fully see the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, we can be assured that He who promised is faithful. We must walk by faith and not by sight as we suffer in this world (2 Cor. 4:16-5:9). Our response and attitude as a people of God in the wilderness is that we are on the outskirts of Canaan but we have yet to enter into the land of promise.

Dr. Gaffin wrote concerning the true character of the church in the last days described in the Book of Hebrews: "...the situation of the church is characterized by 'holding fast' (3:6,14; 4:14; 10:23) and 'pressing on' (6:1); all in all a key ingredient is the need for endurance and perseverance (10:36; 12:1; cf. 10:32)."⁵ In other words, as a wilderness people there is no time for rest "today" in these last days, for this is our time of "works" by faith in Christ's superior work (Heb. 4:10; 6:10). As a pilgrim people in the wilderness of suffering, we should focus with an eschatological faith upon the hope to be revealed (cf. 1 Pet. 1:13). As the author of the Hebrews teaches, we must hope in Christ's accomplished work as a guarantee of our inheritance.

Christ was the true wilderness community, the *archegon* or Pioneer who went before his people into the wilderness and suffered through trials and temptations, but did not sin and ultimately overcame (Heb. 4:15). Christ persevered in the wilderness and overcame sin, death and the devil on behalf of his people (Heb. 2:14ff; cf. Luke 4:1ff). Christ has entered the rest, passed through the heavens and has been seated at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven (Heb. 4:14-16; 9:24). When we suffer as a church in these last days, we must always keep in mind Christ's example of suffering and his work as our sure guarantee for our persevering, because we can approach the throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:16). He who raised Christ from the dead is faithful to make us like him and to perfect us with him (Heb. 13:20,21). We must

⁵ Gaffin, *ibid.*, pg. 35.

understand that although we may want to give up the race and quit at times, we should heed the warnings of Hebrews chapter 6. We must understand that in the New Covenant context, covenantal privileges because of Christ's Person and completed work, requires covenantal responsibility. Apostasy is a real threat to the people of God who suffer and desire to give up or to return to their old ways of living because Christ has delayed his return. We should remember that our hope is in the eschatological triumph of Christ! Because of this eschatological triumph, we his people, must in these last days bear the eschatological testing in order to be conformed to his likeness.⁶ As wilderness people, we must set our eyes on Jesus and persevere, not expecting all the fruits of the Promised Land in the wilderness. We must remember that we are indeed pilgrim people in the wilderness who have yet to arrive in the Promised Land of rest, but we are already *heirs* of this rest now! This is the present wilderness-suffering identity of the people of God now.

III. CHRIST'S SUPERIORITY TO ANGELS (1:5-14)

The author to the Hebrews begins his homily by immediately focusing the eyes and faith of the people to the fact that God has spoken: in the past to our fathers through prophets, and now *to us* in a Son. These words are words of comfort because many to whom the author of Hebrews wrote thought the words delivered by angels were comforting and wanted to return to an Old Covenant way of living. However, the author teaches them that these words have been spoken by the one who would fulfill all the commandments and the law, the words the angels had mediated on Mt. Sinai according to Jewish tradition.⁷ These words of Christ are eternal and even though the grass withers and fades, the words of Christ endure forever (1 Pet. 1:23-25).

⁶ Gaffin, *ibid.*, pg.35-36.

The hope for all those in the church who suffer is to realize that God has spoken to us in our present condition as wilderness-sufferers, revealing himself in Christ, and he has spoken the better word to us in the context of a better covenant. The words of Christ *to us* are better because as the God-Man, Christ was able to accomplish and fulfill all the promises made to believers in the Old Covenant which was only anticipatory or proleptic (Heb. 10:1). These words are those that are spoken by the Spirit of God, who because of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ now dwells within us in the last days (Acts 2:16-21; Heb. 1:1-4; cf. Joel 2:28ff). These are the words of the Spirit that Christ himself told his disciples would remind them of who they were, and what they should say when persecuted and when they experienced suffering in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 (cf. John 14:25-31; 16:1-33). The words that Christ has spoken to us in these last days, are words to encourage us by faith to persevere to the Last Day. Christ has overcome and been identified with his people, so that we may be a true people of God and learn to be true disciples. God is treating his people who look by faith in their suffering as children (cf. Heb. 12:5ff); we should rejoice in this!

Christ's superiority to Angels as representatives of the Old Covenant is helpful to those who suffer. Now, in these last days, Christ has spoken to us, and also fulfilled the words of the Law mediated by the Angels on Mt. Sinai (Acts 7:37,38; cf. Mt. 5:17-20). In these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son (Heb. 1:2), the Creator and Sustainer of Heaven and Earth. We live in the context of a better covenant, that is the New Covenant when Christ has completed his work on behalf of his people and we can be sure that our only hope is in Christ alone. Those who would be tempted to return to the Old Covenant way of life, those who do not understand their present sufferings in light of the New Covenant, must further

⁷ William Lane writes concerning this: "Sometime prior to the first century, the conviction spread, especially among Hellenistic Jews, that angels had played a mediatorial role in the transmission of the law (cf. Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19; Jos., *Antiquities* 15.136," pg. livff. *ibid.*, Word Publishers, 1991.

understand their identification with Christ in his sufferings, in his humiliation or incarnation. The revelation that was spoken by God in “many times and various ways” (Heb. 1:1) (NIV), has now been spoken finally in a Son who suffered, to encourage his wilderness people to persevere in the midst of their sufferings.

IV. CHRIST’S INCARNATION AND WORK ON BEHALF OF HIS PEOPLE (2:10,17,18; 4:14-16; 5:7-10)

A. The Suffering of Christ

As Christ suffered on our behalf, so we look to him by faith to endure during our own sufferings. The Apostle Peter in his first epistle teaches us that we should not be amazed when trials and sufferings come upon us, because this was told before to us (1 Pet. 4:12ff). The Apostle Peter continues saying that we should rejoice “in so far as you share in Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:13; cf. Mt. 5:11-12). Christ suffered the pains of death on our behalf and became identified with his people in order that he might be a faithful High Priest who would, as the Lamb of God, lay down his life for his sheep (Heb. 2:14-18; cf. John 10:11). Christ’s suffering according to Hebrews 2:10ff is taught to his wilderness people so that we might understand that Christ, although divine, made himself a servant in order that he might fulfill the demands and curse of the Law, and to be obedient unto death (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he humbled himself as a servant in order that as our substitute he might reconcile us to God (Heb. 2:9; cf. Rom. 5:8-11; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). As a son, he identified with his brothers (Heb. 2:11ff), the children of Abraham (Heb. 2:16), in order to be a faithful High Priest on behalf of his people. He is a human High Priest, but one who is of an eternal order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:1-10; 6:13-7:28). Therefore, he could offer a better and eternal sacrifice once and for all by his blood (Heb. 9:26-28). This is the

hope of those who suffer in the wilderness. Christ suffered, and we have not suffered to the point of resisting blood (Heb. 12:3-4), but God uses our suffering to conform us to the image of Christ, the True Eschatological Man (Acts 14:22; 1 Cor. 15:44b-50; Phil. 3:10-14,20-21)

This teaching of the Book of Hebrews may be better understood in what Calvin calls the *duplex mortificatio*. John Calvin says that we have a two-fold mortification: an inner dying to our sins and fleshly way of life and an outer suffering that God brings upon us in order to conform us to Christ's glory.⁸ Because Christ was made perfect or complete through suffering, so his brothers are identified with him are made complete and like him through the same kind of suffering (cf. Heb. 2:10ff; 5:7-10; 12:3ff). While unbelievers harden their hearts in anger against God when they suffer, the righteous who are identified with Christ look to him by faith and are gloriously conformed to his image through their sufferings (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6-9). We should remember what the author says concerning Christ's own suffering: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..." (Heb. 5:8-9). As Hebrews 12 teaches us, God chastises the sons that he loves so that we may share in the holiness of Christ, and the peaceful fruit of righteousness (12:7-11).

B. The Temptation of Christ

As a pilgrim people on the way, who have yet to enter God's rest, we can know that in our sufferings of temptation, we have One who has been tempted in every way that we have, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). Because Christ was Divine and Human, he could fulfill God's Law and remain sinless; because he was also man, he could identify himself with his people, laying down his life as an expiation of sins and a ransom on our behalf (Heb. 2:17,18; 7:26; 9:15).

As a people who live in the wilderness of sin, tasting now some of the benefits of the Eternal or Heavenly by the abiding and indwelling Spirit of God, because of the *arrabon* or down-payment of the Spirit which has been poured out in our hearts (Rom. 5:5; Eph. 1:3-14), we can understand the tension in which we now live. We are no longer under the reign and lordship of sin, but we do still struggle (Rom. 6:14; cf. Rom. 7:13-25). What we want to do, we do not do; but what we do not want to do, that we keep doing- -who shall save us from this body of flesh? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord- -our Great Substitute, who has been tempted as we are (Rom. 7:14ff; cf. Heb. 2:17,18)! Those to whom the author of the Hebrews wrote could not understand why they were presently suffering if Christ was indeed the Victor over sin and death. They desired to turn away because he had not returned for them as quickly as they had imagined (Heb. 2:1-4; 4:1-3; 6:10-12; 12:25ff).

In our temptation, we remember according to the Book of Hebrews that Jesus himself when he began his ministry was taken immediately into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days and forty nights (Luke 4:1ff). He overcame however by the Word of God and he did all this on our behalf. We should not be surprised that although we do live in the Age of the Spirit, we too will be tempted, but not beyond that which we can bear according to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 10:13; cf. 1 Pet. 9,10). The author of the Book of Hebrews is teaching the Church that we should persevere, stand firm, and hold on, knowing that in the same way God was faithful to Christ and rescued him from sin, death, and the Devil, and he has triumphed over them...so he will do this for us as well (Heb. 3:1,2; 12:1,2; 13:20,21). Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Our hope now is because Jesus has a permanent

⁸ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pg. 52ff, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997.

priesthood and is able to save completely (forever) those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Heb. 7:24-25).

Our hope as wilderness-sufferers in the last days comes from the complete and perfect work of Christ on our behalf. As the Apostle Paul teaches us about union with Christ, so the author to the Hebrews explains the benefits of identification with Christ in our union. His work was completed and accepted before God, therefore we know we can boldly come into the throne room and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:14-16). We must persevere by faith, mortifying our sinful nature and laying aside the sins that easily beset us and run the race with perseverance looking upon Christ, the One who was tempted just as we are (Heb. 12:1,2).

Hebrews chapter 2 teaches us that although the devil has been defeated, we still contend with him (2:14-18). God still allows him to persecute us in this world, but now it is for God’s glory and our good (cf. Rom. 8:28-39). We should remember that Christ’s Kingdom was inaugurated when he came the first time, and the gates of hell will never prevail against Christ’s Kingdom. However, as Christ’s Kingdom is progressing, so evil is escalating and progressing at an ever-increasing rate. The sons of the devil will persecute the sons of Christ’s Kingdom, but we are not alone, Christ has been tempted and undergone the same persecution, pain, and suffering on our behalf. The author to the Hebrews is exhorting those who have heard the words of Christ, who have a saving knowledge of his Person and Work, to heed his words and do not forget. If they do, they only have a fearful judgment to expect. As wilderness-suffering believers in the last days, we must heed chapter 10, verses 37-39: “ ‘For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But

we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.”

C. The Sympathy of Christ

The truth of the sympathy of Christ is spoken of by the author of Hebrews to encourage us in our journey. Christ’s sympathy is with our weaknesses, he knows that we are human and frail. He is truly able to uphold us and to keep us from falling. The hope of this message is that Christ endured greater torments than anyone who ever lived. He suffered the curse of the Law on our behalf and tasted the wrath of God, death, and was in the closest relation to our sins upon the cross without being tainted by them (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 1:18-21). In the same way, he is a faithful and merciful High Priest on our behalf. He appears before the throne of God with prayers and petitions on our behalf so that he can present us a radiant Bride before the world when he makes all things new (Heb. 7:25ff).

Christ’s sympathy is that he forgives us our sins because of the work he has accomplished on our behalf; he ever intercedes at the right hand of God upon the throne on behalf of his people. This means that Christ does not only save his people effectively, but his prayers and his sympathizing with our weaknesses guarantees that he will not lose one sheep the Father has given to him. As High Priest of a better covenant and of the things to come, he is able during our trials, temptations and sufferings to sympathize with our weaknesses and present his blood as our Priest, as an efficacious and once-and-for-all offering before the throne of God (Heb. 9:11-28). Therefore, the author of Hebrews teaches us that we can boldly enter the throne room of God because Christ has sympathized and gone before us (Heb. 4:16). We can present our requests unto God and know by faith that he will answer all of our requests. Endurance by prayer, watchfulness, and perseverance is the way into the Kingdom of everlasting rest (cf. Acts 14:22). This should be the expectation of this present life for

believers as we look forward to being in the presence of our Maker (cf. Rev. 21:3ff).

Knowing that there is a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, with foundations that cannot be shaken, although we have not arrived as of yet (Heb. 12:18ff; cf. 4:1ff). We are still on the outskirts of the city, in the wilderness of sin and temptation and suffering, where Christ by his Spirit ministers effectively unto us (cf. Romans 8:18-27).

D. The Perfecting of the High Priest of the New Covenant

The Book of Hebrews teaches us that Christ was perfected in order that he may be an effective High Priest of the New Covenant. The readers of Hebrews should not understand this perfecting of Christ as referring to his majesty and deity as Son of God, but to his human nature as a real and true human High Priest who was made of flesh and blood. This means that the suffering of Jesus was his “training school” which made him perfect for the Eternal High Priesthood.⁹ As the priests in the OT of the Aaronic order were prepared for service as high priest through rituals of various kinds, so Jesus was prepared and perfected through his obedient work on behalf of his people. The Aaronic Priesthood was a type or shadow on earth of the True Priesthood in heaven. Therefore, he was ritually purified according to the instructions given by God to Moses. He was also a temporal High Priest because he offered sacrifices year after year that showed it was impermanent, and that it was inefficacious for the once and for all removal and forgiveness of sins (Heb. 10:11-14). One reason was because the High Priest himself was sinful and although he was purified according to ritual, he offered up the sacrifice on behalf of the people whom he represented and on behalf of his own sins.

Christ on the other hand, being of an eternal order, that is the High Priesthood of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:1ff), did not purify his people by types and shadows, but by his real and true suffering and humiliation. He was identified with his people as the True High Priest of

Melchizedek, therefore he was without sin and did not need to make atonement for his own sins. In fact, he appeared once and for all with his own sacrifice to take away the sins that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away (Heb. 2:17,18; cf. 10:1-4). As the True Priest, Christ was identified with his people, but by offering himself, he offered up his own blood that had eternal efficacy (Heb. 7:26-28; 9:25ff).

Those who suffer in the wilderness and are tempted to turn away from Christ with a non-eschatological and apostate faith, should remember that Christ himself learned obedience and was perfected as a man in order to serve God on our behalf as a Perfect and Eternal High Priest. This means that he fulfilled the Father's work that he had been given to accomplish (Heb. 10:5-10); he did this work willingly, but he took upon himself the curse of the Law for the transgressions that had been committed by his people. In the same way as our Great High Priest, so God chooses to perfect his sons through pain and suffering. God chastises his children so that they may be ever more increasingly be conformed to the image of Christ the High Priest (Heb. 12:5ff). You see, according to the author of Hebrews, there is no real theodicy, only an eternal plan and wise discipline of truly making his people to be like Christ in every way. In this pilgrim walk, our walk is a walk of wilderness-suffering, awaiting our Great High Priest to come out of the Most Holy Place in Heaven and to appear a second time not for judgment, but for the salvation of all those who are longing for his appearing (Heb. 9:28).

Because there is no real theodicy, those who suffer can be confident to know that Christ our High Priest suffered on our behalf in his humiliation and so he has called us to a life of suffering in his discipleship program. It is in this context that we better understand the words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be

⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pg. 109ff. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998.

comforted.” To redeem from evil and sin was the reason for Christ’s ministry as High Priest and as pilgrims in the wilderness who have yet to enter our rest, we should expect nothing less (Heb. 3:7-4:13). If God should grant times of peace, it is peace by the Spirit that passes understanding, but our Kingdom membership has no rights in this world because Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world. If they persecuted him, they will persecute us; if Christ suffered, so will his people; if they disown him, so they will disown us...but he is faithful who has called us (Mt. 5:10-12; 2 Tim. 2:11-13)!

V. CHRIST’S SUPERIOR OFFERING OF HIMSELF (8:1-10:18)

Christ’s offering was superior to all the offerings that foreshadowed him in type in the Old Covenant (Heb. 8:5-7; 10:1,2). His offering was one that though he tasted sin and death on our behalf, was himself without sin (Heb. 4:15). He who laid down his life for his sheep, his church, his people, is He who is both God and man. His offering was not temporary but of an eschatological and eternal significance (Heb. 9:11-28). God accepted his once-and-for-all offering on behalf of his people because in the context of a New Covenant, Christ fulfilled all the covenant obligations that his people had failed to keep (Heb. 8:8-12; 10:5-10). Those who suffer should allow their present and painful wilderness circumstances to be enlightened by the Light of the World as he suffered beyond anything his people could have endured, in order that they might have hope eschatologically in their present plight (Heb. 12:1-4).

We who suffer could not have redeemed ourselves, we could never as dead in trespasses in sins, offered ourselves up to God. Our sinful transgressions of the covenant disqualified us from any real and efficacious offering. Even if hypothetically possible for one to live the Law perfectly (though it is not possible), man could never have endured the wrath of God.

Christ as human and divine High Priest not only fulfilled the law positively, keeping all its commands, and negatively, without sin, but endured the pains of death and hell, the wrath of God as he descended into hell on our behalf. This was the Great High Priest of whom the Father was well pleased and raised him up for our justification, pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh so that we might be like Christ, conformed to his image and be with Christ, in his presence.

VI. PROMISE AND PUNISHMENT IN HEBREWS

As wilderness people, the author to the Hebrews want us to consider these truths of Christ in a new and better covenant so that we do not fail to continue and persevere by his grace. He speaks of promises to those who are faithful and to those who overcome, but he also speaks of a fearful judgment of God Almighty on those who become apostate and who fail to listen to the words of encouragement or exhortation that he is teaching them. Those who do not continue, but get bogged down in the worries and cares of this life; those who have a non-eschatological faith, who put their hands to the plow and look back; those who look back to Egypt as Israel under Moses and die in the wilderness outside the covenantal Promised Land. For those who would consider giving up, they must expect the wrath of God for their sins because they will appear before Mt. Sinai with fire, thunder, and rumblings- -before the Theophany, or presence of God- -to appear before a holy God without a Mediator (Heb. 12:18-29). O, how painful and terrible will be that day for those who give up the walk, those who are consumed eternally in the awesome presence of God's wrath.

The promise of understanding the word of exhortation which the author of the Hebrews writes is for those who look by faith to better and heavenly promises (Heb. 13:22). The

promises are for those whose faith is like those in the Old Covenant who trusted God with an eschatological faith that looked forward and enlightened their present wilderness circumstances in this world.¹⁰ It is those who look by faith and not by sight to the work of Christ, and to understand that the Christ of the Covenant has fulfilled the Law of God and propitiated their sins. For those who suffer in every age in the wilderness, there is hope of one who suffered outside the city gates on their behalf so that they might enter the Eternal and Blessed Holy New Jerusalem, to be in the presence of God forever (Heb. 13:12ff; cf. 2 Cor. 4:13-14). This can only be accomplished by an eschatological faith that informs present sufferings and circumstances with the knowledge that what God has said he will do and that all the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).

An eschatological faith in the midst of trials and sufferings has been displayed for us by a great cloud of witnesses, fathers and mothers who have persevered to the end without actually seeing what God had promised. However, in these Last Days, in real time and history, Christ has appeared on our behalf to take away our sins; he has spoken to us the words of God in the New Covenant; he has shown us by his own suffering what we should expect and yet he has also gloriously poured out his Spirit in our hearts so that we can call God “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:14-17; cf. Gal. 4:6-7). The Holy Spirit has been shed abroad in our hearts, we have been justified by faith and now have peace with God (Rom. 5:1ff). We are in union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection and we have word-pictures, or sacraments of the things which have been accomplished for us (Rom. 6:3ff).

We live in a new and better age, an age that we should not take for granted. Rather, one in which we should look back to the Person and Work of our High Priest, and forward with

¹⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory*, pg. 116ff: “Hence his heavenly-mindedness can never destroy interest in the unfolding of the ways of God throughout the history of the present world. Neither grows he impatient when the promise seems to tarry. For his hope also is in him a vitalizing power. It lives by the things that are not as though they were already, and makes the future supply strength for the present.”

an eschatological faith to the place where God has promised to bring us- -in his very presence in the garden, in paradise, in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1ff). Those who suffer should rejoice because their eternal reward and inheritance, although given to us now as a foretaste, is in heaven and we wait patiently by faith on Christ to return a second time. We cry “Come, Lord Jesus” because we long to be taken out of this world of sin and flesh and into his glorious presence.

In this new and better covenant, we have hope in eschatological realities that should fix our eyes by faith upon Jesus our High Priest. These eschatological realities are given to us as a foretaste of what is to come when Christ will be revealed a second time (Heb. 9:28). In the preaching of sermons on the Lord’s Day, we hear the words of Christ and we are pointed back to his work and forward to his reward. We have eschatological realities given to us in the Lord’s Supper as we sup by faith with Jesus our High Priest which points us back to his blood and body sacrificed on our behalf, but forward as we look to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem. In worship we have eschatological hope now. We worship God in Spirit in Truth, although the Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, we are the Temple of God’s Spirit which now indwells us. In our worship we thank God in our gratitude for his gift in Christ and we look forward to when we will praise God both day and night in his very presence. Why should we rejoice in our wilderness-sufferings? All these realities are the eschatological benefits of living in this new and better covenant. Although we are pilgrim people; although we are living in the wilderness prior to when our King Joshua will return to lead us across the Jordan to enter the land; although we do not see him now, we love him with a joy inexpressible and full of glory. All these things the author of the Book of Hebrews teaches us that we have now because of this new and better covenant and therefore we should live and have an eschatological and expectant faith because God is

faithful! We do not live in the time of the Old Covenant with shadows and types, but in the New Covenant displayed in the True Christ, our Great and Glorious High Priest, how much more ought we to offer our bodies living sacrifices, holy and pleasing unto him, because he who called us is holy, so ought we to be holy as well (Rom. 12:1,2; 1 Pet. 1:13ff).

The Apostle Paul can further help us understand the theology of suffering in the Book of Hebrews for the last days. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, the Apostle Paul describes the God of all comfort in the midst of our trials and sufferings. In verse 5, he says that we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. For Paul, as for the author of Hebrews, suffering is a last days reality; but it has a purpose: the strengthening of the brethren as they are conformed to the image of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 5:10), and ultimately, for the glory of God. God works in us suffering to develop perseverance, character and hope, according to Romans 5:3-5. In Romans 5:2, Paul calls this the "hope of sharing the glory of God."

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle says, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:8b-11). The interesting thing here in this portion of Paul's writings is that he describes our present life now in union with Christ as our "death union". That is, to truly know Christ, as the author of the Hebrews writes, is to be conformed to Christ's likeness, through his sufferings. If we as a people of God in the last days want to truly know Christ, we cannot experience his "resurrection"

without first going through his “cross-bearing” and “death” daily in order to be like him. It is a glorious hope for the people who suffer to know that they are being made like Jesus in his sufferings. Christ is our brother and we in his family will suffer along with him (Heb. 2:10ff). This reminds us of Calvin’s *duplex mortificatio*, or double mortification occurring in the believer’s life in order to kill all remaining remnants of our old man and putting on the new man, who is being conformed to the likeness of Christ Jesus! This “putting on of the new man” is accomplished in part by true and real sufferings. Therefore, we should not turn back or away from Christ and His Kingdom, but look to him with an eschatological faith in order that we may overcome and persevere. This is the great hope in the word of exhortation to the Hebrews!

There will be suffering now because we are in the wilderness, but we have the promises and possess the Spirit of God now to help us to endure through our struggles. We have a champion, a pioneer who went before us and now we look to him, knowing that we can endure. In fact, Christ promises to those who overcome that we will sit with him on his throne in the New Jerusalem; we will be given a new name; we will eat from the Tree of Life; we will be in God’s presence eternally (Rev. 2-3). We should be able to realize ourselves now, in the midst of our sufferings, taking part in these heavenly activities under the preaching of the word, the sacraments, and in worship of our God. We should realize that in this foretaste that we graciously have been given, that we are indeed now seated upon the throne with Christ, raised with him in the heavenlies and our lives are hidden in him (Col. 3:1-4). We should understand our new name as identified in Christ’s Person and Work and the hope we have because our names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. We should understand ourselves now to have begun to partake of the Heavenly Tree of Life, the life lived by the Eternal Spirit who indwells us! This is our great hope! This is our

eschatological faith! This is the reason for the word of exhortation written to the recipients of the Book of Hebrews, and the word of encouragement written for us today in the midst of our wilderness-sufferings.

CRB

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