The Sequel—The Right Way (10:19-25)

We have now concluded the solid doctrinal section that constitutes the main section of the epistle. As Paul often does, the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers on the basis of the doctrine he has made so clear. Because the great teachings he has set forth are true, it follows that those who profess them should live in a manner befitting them. There are resemblances between the exhortation in this paragraph and that in 4:14-16. But we must not forget that the intervening discussion has made clear what Christ’s high priestly work has done for his people. On the basis of Christ’s sacrifice, the writer exhorts his readers to make the utmost use of the blessing that has been won for them.

19 The address “brothers” is affectionate, and the writer exhorts them on the basis of the saving events. “Therefore” links the exhortation with what has preceded it. These saving events give the Christian a new attitude towards the presence of God. Nadab and Abihu died while offering incense (Lev 10:2), and it had become the custom for the high priest not to linger in the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement lest people be terrified (M Yoma 5:1). But Christians approach God confidently, completely at home in the situation created by Christ’s saving work. They enter “the Most Holy Place,” which, of course, is no physical sanctuary but is, in truth, the presence of God. And they enter it “by the blood of Jesus,” i.e., on the basis of his saving death.

20 The way to God is both “new” and “living.” It is “new” because what Jesus has done has created a completely new situation, “living” because that way is indissolubly bound up with the Lord Jesus himself. The writer does not say, as John does, that Jesus is the way (John 14:6), but this is close to his meaning. This is not the way of the dead animals of the old covenant or the lifeless floor over which the Levitical high priest walked. It is the living Lord himself. This way to God he “dedicated” (NIV, “opened”; the word is that used of dedicating the old covenant with blood, 9:18), which hints again at his sacrifice of himself. The “curtain” goes back once more to the imagery of the tabernacle, for it was through the curtain that hung before the Most Holy Place that the high priest passed into the very presence of God.

There is a problem as to whether we take “that is, his flesh” (NIV, “body”) with “curtain,” which is the more natural way of taking the Greek, or whether we take it with “way.” The difficulty in taking it with “curtain” is that it seems to make the flesh of Christ that which veils God from men. There is a sense, however, in which Christians have always recognized this, even if in another sense they see Christ’s body as revealing God. As a well-known hymn puts it, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see.” The value of this way of looking at the imagery of the curtain is that it was by the rending of the veil—the flesh being torn on the cross—that the way to God was opened. The author is saying in his own way what the Synoptists said when they spoke of the curtain of the temple as being torn when Christ died (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). The flesh (NIV, “body”) here is the correlate of the blood in v.19. The alternative is to see in the equation of “flesh” and “way” the thought that the whole earthly life of Jesus is the way that brings us to God. This is not impossible, but the grammar favors the former view.

21 The term “great priest” is a literal rendering of the Hebrew title we know as “high priest” (see, e.g., Num 35:25, 28; Zech 6:11). We have had references to Jesus as “a son over God’s house” (3:6) and as a high priest. Now the two thoughts are brought together. The author does not forget Jesus’ high place. He has taken a lowly place (cf. the reference to his flesh, v.20), and he has died to make a way to God for men. But this assumption of the role of a servant should not blind us to the fact that Jesus is “over” God’s household. Once again we have the highest Christology combined with the recognition that Jesus rendered lowly service.

22 Now come three exhortations: “Let us draw near,” “Let us hold unwaveringly” (v.23), and “Let us consider” (v.24). The contemplation of what Christ has done should stir his people into action. First, we are to draw near to God “with a sincere heart.” The “heart” stands for the whole of the inner life of man, and it is important that as God’s people approach him, they be right inwardly. It is the “pure in heart” who see God (Matt 5:8). In view of what Christ has done for us, we should approach God in deep sincerity. The “full assurance of faith” stresses that it is only by trust in Christ, who has performed for us the high priestly work that gives access to God, that we can draw near at all.

The references to the sprinkled hearts and the washed bodies should be taken together. The washing of the body with pure water is surely a reference to baptism, despite the objection of Calvin, who sees it as meaning “the Spirit of God” (in loc.). But the thing that distinguished Christian baptism from the multiplicity of lustrations that were practiced in the religions of the ancient world was that it was more than an outward rite cleansing the body from ritual defilement. Baptism is the outward sign of an inward cleansing, and it was the latter that was the more important. So here it is mentioned first. The sprinkling of the hearts signifies the effect of the blood of Christ on the inmost being. Christians are cleansed within by his shed blood (cf. the sprinkling of the priests, Exod 29:21; Lev 8:30).

23 The second exhortation is to hold fast the profession of hope. The author has already used the verb krateo in urging his readers to “hold on to” their confidence and their glorying in hope (3:6) and the beginning of their confidence (3:14). With a different verb (kratoe), he has told them, to “hold firmly” to the confession (4:14). Now he wants them to retain a firm grasp on “the confession of the hope,” or, as NIV puts it, “the hope we profess.” This is an unusual expression, and we might have expected “faith” rather than “hope” (this is actually the reading in a few MSS). But there is point in referring to hope. It has already been described as an “anchor for the soul” (6:19). Westcott comments, “Faith reposes completely in the love of God: Hope vividly anticipates that God will fulfill His promises in a particular way” (in loc.). Christians can hold fast to their hope in this way because
behind it is a God in whom they can have full confidence. God is thoroughly to be relied on. When he makes a promise, that promise will infallibly be kept. He has taken the initiative in making the promise, and he will fulfill his purposes in making it.

24 The third exhortation is to consider one another. This is the only place where the author uses the expression “one another” (allelou), though it is frequently found in the NT. He is speaking of a mutual activity, one in which believers encourage one another, not one where leaders direct the rest as to what they are to do. The word rendered “spur” is actually a noun, paroxysmos, which usually has a meaning like “irritation” or “exasperation.” It is most unusual to have it used in a good sense, and the choice of the unusual word makes the exhortation more striking.

Christians are to provoke one another to love (agape), a word found again in Hebrews only in 6:10. It is the characteristic NT term for a love that is not self-seeking, a love whose paradigm is the Cross (1 John 4:10). This is a most important Christian obligation, and believers are to help one another attain it. It is interesting that this kind of love is thus a product of community activity, for it is a virtue that requires others for its exercise. One may practice faith or hope alone, but not love. (For the conjunction of faith, hope, and love, see comments on 6:11.) The readers are to urge one another to “good deeds” as well as to love. The contemplation of the saving work of Christ leads on to good works in the lives of believers. The expression is left general, but the writer selects especially as important love and (in the next verse) the gathering together of believers—an interesting combination.

25 Though NIV might give the impression that this is a fourth exhortation, this is not so. The construction is a participial one, carrying on the thought of the previous verse, not giving up “meeting together.” “Some” were doing this. The word is quite general, and we have no way of knowing who these abstainers were. Though it would be interesting to know whether they were from the same group as the readers, we know no more than that the early church had its problems with people who stayed away from church. It was a dangerous practice because, as Moffatt says, “Any early Christian who attempted to live like a pious particle without the support of the community ran serious risks in an age when there was no public opinion to support him” (in loc.). The attitude may mean that the abstainers saw Christianity as just another religion to be patronized or left alone. They had missed the finality on which the author lays such stress.

The writer goes on to suggest that Christians ought to be exhorting one another and all the more as they see “the Day” getting near. Some think this Day was that of the destruction of Jerusalem, signs of which may have been evident even as this letter was being written. But it is more in accordance with NT usage to see a reference to the Day of Judgment, though, as many commentators point out, it must have been difficult for Christians in those early days to separate the two. The main thing, however, is that the writer is stressing the accountability of his readers. They must act toward their fellow believers as those who will give account of themselves to God.

J. The Sequel—the Wrong Way (10:26-31)

The issues are serious. While the writer continues to express confidence that his friends will do the right thing, he leaves them in no doubt as to the gravity of their situation and the terrible consequences of failing to respond to God’s saving act in Christ. God is a God of love. But he is implacably opposed to all that is evil. Those who perform in wrong face judgment.

26 It is clear that the writer has apostasy in mind. He is referring to people who “have received the knowledge of the truth,” where “truth” (aletheia) stands for “the content of Christianity as the absolute truth” (BAG, s.v.), as it frequently does in the NT. The people in question, then, know what God has done in Christ; their acquaintance with Christian teaching is more than superficial. If, knowing this, they revert to an attitude of rejection, of continual sin (cf. the present participle hamartanonton rendered “keep on sinning”), there remains no sacrifice for sins. Such people have rejected the sacrifice of Christ, and the preceding argument has shown that there is no other. If they revert to the Jewish sacrificial system, they go back to sacrifices that their knowledge of Christianity teaches them cannot put away sin (v.4). The writer adopts no pose of superiority, but his “we” puts him in the same class as his readers. While he emphasizes the danger of others, he does not forget that he too is weak and liable to sin.

27 Far from any sacrifice to put away the sins of the apostates, “only a fearful expectation of judgment” awaits such people. The nature of this expectation is not defined, and the fact that the fate of these evil persons is left indefinite makes the warning all the more impressive. The adjective phoberos (“fearful”) is unusual; it occurs elsewhere in the NT only in v.31 and 12:21 and conveys the idea of “frightening.” The judgment of the person still bearing his sins is a terrible one. The writer describes it as “raging fire” (possibly borrowed from Isa 26:11), which is a vivid expression for “the fire of judgment that, with its blazing flames, appears like a living being intent on devouring God’s adversaries” (BAG, p. 338). The word “enemies” (hypenantios) shows that the apostates were not regarded as holding a neutral position. They have become the adversaries of God.

28-29 An argument from the greater to the lesser brings out the seriousness of the situation. To despise the law of Moses was a very serious matter, but this is more serious still. The law of Moses was held by Jews to be divinely given: anyone who rejected it rejected God’s direction. When this happened, no discretion was allowed: the man must be executed. In such a serious matter the charge had to be proved beyond doubt. The testimony of one witness was not sufficient; there had to be two or three. But when there were the required witnesses to say what the man had done then justice took over. There was no place for mercy. He must be executed (Deut 17:6; 19:15).

The writer invites the readers to work out for themselves how much more serious is the punishment of the man who apostatizes from Christ. It must be more severe than under the old way because Jesus is greater than Moses (3:1ff.); the new covenant is better than the old, founded on better promises (8:6) and established by a better sacrifice (9:23).

There are three counts in the indictment of the apostate. First, he has “trampled the Son of God under foot.” It is most unusual to have the verb katapateo used with a personal object (elsewhere in the NT it is the literal treading under the feet of things that the verb denotes). “To trample under foot” is a strong expression for disdain. It implies not only rejecting Christ but also despising him—him who is no less than “the Son of God.”

The second count is that the apostate takes lightly the solemn shedding of covenant blood. “The blood of the covenant” is an expression used of the blood that established the old covenant (Exod 24:8; cf. Heb 9:20) and also of the blood of Jesus that established the new covenant (Matt
26:28; Mark 14:24; cf. also Luke 22:20; 1Cor 11:25). The author regards it as a dreadful thing to take lightly the shedding of the blood of one who is so high and holy and whose blood moreover is the means of establishing the new covenant that alone can bring men near to God. The apostate regards that blood as "a common thing" (koinon). That is to say he treats the death of Jesus as just like the death of any other man. The word "common" can also be understood over against the holy and it thus comes to mean "unhallowed." So NIV has the translation "an unholy thing." This stands out all the more sharply when it is remembered that that blood has "sanctified" him. The person who accepts Christ's way is set apart for God by the shedding of Christ's blood. As elsewhere in this epistle the idea of being sanctified refers to the initial act of being set apart for God, not the progressive growth in grace it usually means in the other NT writings. To go back on this decisive act is to deny the significance of the blood, to see it as a common thing.

The third count in the indictment of the apostate is that he has "insulted the Spirit of grace." The author does not often refer to the Holy Spirit, being occupied for the most part with the person and the work of the Son. Nevertheless, he esteems the person of the Spirit highly as this passage shows. It also implies that he saw the Spirit as a person, not an influence or a thing, for it is only a person who can be insulted. His word for "insulted" is enybrizo, from hybris, which Westcott sees as "that insolent self-assertion which disregards what is due to others. It combines arrogance with wanton injury" (in loc.). In the NT there is a variety of ways of referring to the Spirit, but only here is he called "the Spirit of grace" (cf. Zech 12:10). The expression may mean "the gracious Spirit of God" or "the Spirit through whom God's grace is manifested." Willful sin is an insult to the Spirit, who brings the grace of God to man.

30 The appeal to knowledge ("we know") reminds us of Paul who is fond of appealing to his readers' understanding. The author calls God "him who said" words of Scripture. He uses this word for "said" (eipon) six times, four of them being with quotations from Scripture. He is sure that God speaks to men. The author's first quotation here is from Deuteronomy 32:35. It agrees exactly neither with the MT nor the LXX, though it is quoted in the same form in Romans 12:19. It is unlikely that either the Deuteronomy or Romans passage is dependent on the other, and much more probably the authors were both using a Greek text form that happens not to have survived. We usually speak of "the" LXX as though there was but one translation of the OT into Greek, but it is highly probable that there were a number of such translations.

The quotation here emphasizes that vengeance is a divine prerogative. It is not for men to take it into their own hands. But the emphasis is not on that. It is rather on the certainty that the Lord will act. The wrongdoer cannot hope to go unpunished because avenging wrong is in the hands of none less than God. The second quotation, from Deuteronomy 32:36, agrees with the LXX (see also Ps 135:14 [134:14]). It leaves no doubt whatever about the Lord's intervention, for he is named and so is his activity.

The word "judge" may mean "give a favorable judgment" as well as "condemn." In both Deuteronomy 32:36 and Psalm 135:14, it is deliverance that is in mind: and both times RSV, for example, translates it as "vindicate." But in the OT God does not vindicate his people if they have sinned. Vindication implies that they have been faithful in their service and that God's intervention recognizes this. But where they have not been faithful, that same principle of impartial judgment according to right demands that intervention bring punishment. It is this that the author has primarily in mind. That a man claims to be a member of the people of God does not exempt him from judgment. God judges all. Let not the apostate think that he, of all people, can escape.

31 The sinner should not regard the judgment of God calmly. It is "a dreadful thing" to fall into God's hands ("dreadful" renders the word phoberos, which is translated "fearful" in v.27—i.e., it is frightening). David chose to fall into God's hands (2Sam 24:14; 1 Chronicles 21:13; cf. Ecclesiasticus 2:18). But David was a man of faith; he committed himself in trust to God, not man. It is different with one who has rejected God's way. He must reckon with the fact that they will one day fall into the hands of a living, all-powerful deity. Such a fate is a daunting prospect, not to be regarded with equanimity.

K. Choose the Right (10:32-39)

As he has done before, after a section containing stern warnings, the author ex presses his confidence in his readers and encourages them to take the right way. He reminds them of the early days of their Christian experience. Then they had experienced some form of persecution and had come through it triumphantly. This should teach them that in Christ they had blessings of a kind they could never have had if they had given way to persecution.

32 “But” (which NIV ommits) sets the following section over against the preceding one. The author does not class his friends among those who go back on their Christian profession. He begins by inviting them to contemplate the days just after they had become Christians. The verb translated “received the light” (photisthentes) was sometimes used in the early church in reference to baptism. But it is difficult to find it used with this meaning as early as this, and in any case it is not required by the context. It is the enlightenment the gospel brought that is in mind. This had resulted in some form of persecution that the readers had endured in the right spirit. There should be no going back on that kind of endurance now. The word rendered “contest” (athlesis) is used of athletic competition and is, of course, the term from which we get our word “athletics.” It became widely used of the Christian as a spiritual athlete and so points to the strenuous nature of Christian service. On this occasion, the athletic performance had been elicited by a period of suffering they had steadfastly endured.

33-34 This suffering is further explained. “Sometimes ... at other times” (so also RSV) is often taken to mean that the one group of people had had two experiences.

But it seems more likely that we should take it to mean two groups: “Some of you ... others of you.” The first group had been subjected to verbal attack ("insult") and also to other forms of trouble (thlipsis points to severe pressure and thus to trouble or "persecution" of various kinds). The word "publicly exposed" (theatrizomenoi) is not a common one; its connection with theatron "a theatre" makes it clear that it connotes publicity. The readers had been made a spectacle by being exposed to insult and injury.

The second group had suffered by being associates of the former group. This is explained as sympathizing with prisoners. In the world of
the first century the lot of prisoners was difficult. Prisoners were to be punished, not pampered. Little provision was made for them, and they were dependent on friends for their supplies. For Christians visiting prisoners was a meritorious act (Matt 25:36). But there was some risk, for the visitors became identified with the visited. The readers of the epistle had not shrunk from this. It is not pleasant to endure ignominy, and it is not pleasant to be lumped with the ignominious. They had endured both. Attempts have been made to identify the persecution behind these words, but there is not enough information for such attempts to be successful. None of them had been killed (12:4), a fact that rules out Jerusalem, where James had been put to death quite early (Acts 12:2), and Rome after the Neronian persecution. We have no means of knowing what the persecution referred to was.

In addition to identifying with prisoners, the readers had had the right attitude to property. There is a question whether the word rendered “confiscation” (harpage) means official action by which the state took over their goods, or whether it points rather to mob violence. A third possibility is the readers’ voluntary surrender of their goods to some Christian community when they joined it (as Buchanan holds possible). But the word harpage makes this unlikely. It is also an unlikely term for the action of officials (unless they were acting in a very “unofficial” manner; the scope for petty officialdom to tyrannize over Christians was immense). On the whole, it looks like mob violence or the like. The readers had taken this in the right spirit. It would not be a surprise if they endured all this with fortitude, but that they accepted it “joyfully” is another thing altogether. So firmly had their interest been fixed on heavenly possessions that they could take the loss of earthly goods with exhilaration.

The reason for their cheerful attitude is not quite clear. NIV gives a very plausible understanding of the Greek. But “yourselves” might be the object and not the subject of the verb, in which case it means “knowing that you had yourselves as a better and lasting possession.” This would be in the spirit of Luke 21:19: “By standing firm you will save yourselves.” Whichever way we take it, the possession (the word is singular in the Gr.) was both better and longer lasting. The possession in Christ is not subject to petty depredations like the earthly possessions of which they had been robbed. It is an abiding possession.

35 “So” connects what follows with what precedes. There is a reason for the conduct suggested. “Throw away” (apoballo) seems a fairly vigorous verb and perhaps conveys the thought of a reckless rejection of what is valuable. Because the earlier conduct of the readers showed that they knew the value of their possession in Christ, the writer can appeal to them not to discard it. As Christians they had a confidence that was based firmly on Christ’s saving work and that would be the height of folly to throw away. What they had endured for Christ’s sake entitled them to a reward. Let them not throw it away. The NT does not reject the notion that Christians will receive rewards, though, of course, that is never the prime motive for service.

36 The Greek has the equivalent of “you have need of perseverance”; the word hypomone denotes an active, positive endurance or steadfastness. Christianity is no flash in the pan. “Need” means something absolutely necessary, not merely desirable. This leads to the thought that doing the will of God has its recompense. The author has spoken of Christ as occupied with doing the will of God (vv.7ff.). Now he makes the point that Christ’s people must similarly be occupied in doing that will. He describes the result in terms of receiving the promise, and this safeguards against any doctrine of salvation by works. God’s good gift is in mind, and it is secured—though not merited—by their continuing to the end.

37-38 Now the writer encourages his readers by drawing their attention to passages in Scripture that point to the coming of God’s Messiah in due course. The “very little while” (cf. Isa 26:20) points to a quite short period. The argument is that the readers ought not let the “very little while” rob them of their heavenly reward. The writer goes on to a quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4, but he makes a few significant changes from the LXX. The first of them is to precede his quotation with the definite article so that it is “the,” not “a,” coming one. In other words, the reference to the Messiah is unmistakable (cf., e.g., Matt 11:3; 21:9; John 11:27 for this expression used of the Messiah). The rabbis could interpret this passage messianically as when it was held to teach people patience and warn them against calculating the date when the Messiah would come: “Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end. For they would say, since the predetermined time has arrived, and yet he has not come, he will never come. But (even so), wait for him, as it is written, Though he tarry, wait for him” (Tal Sanhedrin 97b).

The author has reversed the order of the clauses. He thus finishes with the words about shrinking back, and this enables him to apply them immediately to his readers. We should notice also a difference between the Hebrew and the Greek of this quotation. In the original Hebrew the point is that the faithful must await God’s good time for the destruction of their enemies, the Chaldeans. This cannot be hastened, and they must patiently await it. Meanwhile, the faithful man is preserved by his trust in God. In the LXX, however, it is not so much for the fulfillment of the vision that the prophet waits as for a person, a deliverer. If someone appears and draws back, he is not God’s deliverer. The author is using the LXX to bring out the truth that Christ will come in due course. In the intervening time, the readers must patiently await him.

The words about the “righteous one” living by faith are used again in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. In those passages the emphasis appears to be on how the man who is righteous by faith will live, whereas here the author seems to be using the words to convey the meaning that the person God accepts as righteous will live by faith. Paul is concerned with the way a man comes to be accepted by God; the author is concerned with the importance of holding fast to one’s faith in the face of temptations to abandon it.

The mention of faith (pistis) leads us into the most sustained treatment of the subject in the NT. The term is mentioned again in the next verse and then throughout chapter 11. The first point made is that faith and shrinking back are opposed to each other.

The passage does not say from what the shrinking back is. In the context, however, it must relate to proceeding along the way of faith and salvation. The quotation from Habakkuk makes it clear that God is not at all pleased with the one who draws back. It is important to go forward in the path of faith.

39 The chapter closes with a ringing affirmation of confidence in which the writer identifies himself with his readers. He takes no position of superiority but sees himself as one with them. He sees two possibilities: on the one hand, drawing back and being destroyed; on the other hand, persevering in faith to salvation. The end result of shrinking back he sees as total loss (apoleia). But that will not be the fate of his readers. Far from being lost, they will go on in faith and be saved.