

Blessed Assurance

By

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1. The Power of the Word

Uncertainty can be very debilitating. By contrast, once we're sure of something, the release from all our previous uncertainties can be very liberating. It's God's intention that Christians should possess certainty in the essential matters of faith.

There's a word in the New Testament that has a ring of Christian confidence about it. It's one which means 'full assurance' or, in other words, 'total conviction'. In this chapter, we'll look at the first of the four places it's found in our Bibles. The apostle Paul used it in describing some of the townspeople of Thessalonica who had responded to his preaching on a visit there. By letter he later reminded them:

'Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

And he went on in the next chapter to add:

we thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God (2:13).

So what was this full assurance or full conviction that these Thessalonians had? They had been fully convinced that the message Paul had preached to them was from God: it was God's own message to their hearts. They couldn't have failed to see that was the preacher's personal conviction. The word, we read, came to them with full assurance. Paul the preacher was certainly persuaded that the message he'd been given to preach was a divine message. He told others that what he delivered to them was what he himself had received from the Lord. Speaking more generally on another occasion he'd asked how anyone could preach unless they'd been sent (Romans 10:15). The apostle Paul was a man on a mission. He did what he encouraged his protégé Timothy to do: to *'preach the Word'* (God's Word; 2 Timothy 4:2). Like the Old Testament prophet, Paul saw himself as the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message (Haggai 1:13).

In fact, he uses that very expression in the second letter he wrote to the new Church of God at Thessalonica. In chapter 3, he writes of *the Lord's message* (2 Thessalonians 3:1) which a couple of verses later he describes as the 'commands' (3:4,6,10,12,14) and also as the 'tradition' of the apostles (3:6). It's impressive to see the strength of Paul's total conviction as expressed here that the apostolic tradition - the teaching handed down by the apostles - was totally identified as being the Lord's own message. And Paul's conviction has, for us, the endorsement of the Holy Spirit as forming part of the written Word of God.

Whenever a preacher takes up God's Word, and faithfully preaches it in the Spirit's power, then we - like the Thessalonians - can be assured that we're hearing the Lord's message. And because it's the Lord's message, it must have full authority in our life. The authority of the message is really Paul's emphasis in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3.

He first of all deals with the need **to spread the Word in the world** (vv.1-3). In this connection he mentions friends like those at Thessalonica who embrace the Word - who glorify it by receiving it; but then, on the other hand, Paul goes on to describe enemies who oppose the Word when he requests prayer that he and his co-workers *may be delivered from wicked and evil men for not everyone has (the) faith*. It's interesting that when Paul talks about the need to spread God's Word, he writes concerning 'the faith'. The Bible makes a difference between 'the faith' and 'faith'. The Faith is the objective body of beliefs; whereas 'faith' is the faculty of believing that body of biblical truths - of which we can be assured that it is the Lord's message.

Not everyone, of course, has that blessed assurance, and so Paul clearly implies spiritual conflict when, on the one hand, he talks of 'the faithful Lord' and, on the other hand, of 'the evil one', that's Satan of course. Spreading the Word of God will inevitably bring us into the arena of battle.

In fact, the battle rages within us too, and certainly within local churches like the Church of God we read about here at Thessalonica - because the second vital need Paul emphasises in relation to the Lord's message is the need, not only to spread it to others, but also to obey it ourselves, **to obey the Word in the churches** (vv.4-15). How hypocritical, not to mention how wrong, it would be to share the commands of God's Word with others while disregarding them in our own lives at the same time!

Paul definitely emphasises our need to obey God's authoritative Word in the following section of 2 Thessalonians 3. Just count up for yourselves later how many times he uses words like 'command' and 'obey' as you read from verse 4 to verse 14.

Now at this point I want to confess that previously I used to enjoy verse 5 of this chapter in isolation - as a stand-alone devotional thought. It's worthy enough as that, of course, for it's the verse that says: *And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.*

But I'd like us to set it firmly in the context of Second Thessalonians chapter 3. The context, as we've seen, reminds us that the traditional apostolic teaching of the New Testament is nothing short of being the Lord's own message. When we read the surrounding emphasis on commands and obedience, I believe Paul's intended meaning becomes clearer. This is a devotional thought with a purpose. For love like God's and patience like Christ's will always result in obedience.

And it's a willing-hearted obedience at that, one in which we're not to be selective, or choosy, as to what bits of the apostolic tradition we'd rather not keep today, thank you very much. How can we dare to be selective in our obedience? That's not obedience at all! Do we have similar authority to the apostles in order to select between what's a fundamental truth and what's a secondary doctrine? What part of the apostolic pattern found in our Bibles do we have the right to dispense with today? This was obviously a live issue in Paul's day. Because he goes on to say: *Keep away from every brother who does not live according to the (apostolic) teaching.* So it seems some were intent on ignoring what they didn't like. The words 'keep away' make it perfectly obvious that obedience demands separation to the apostolic commands as communicated by the preaching of Paul, remembering the assurance that this is nothing other than the Lord's own message. Perhaps one specific issue for some at Thessalonica was a refusal to work (2 Thes.3:6,8; 1 Thes.4:11), but if that's included as important, what will we exclude as unimportant?

When disobedience to the Lord's message has to be acted upon by effecting a separation between the faithful and the unfaithful, we're into the whole subject of discipline in the local church, such as we see illustrated throughout the New Testament churches of God. It's not a popular or fashionable subject, but in the logical flow of Paul's teaching here this is where we get to. Church discipline is needed when the Christian standard is defiantly refused.

In his pastoral letters, but especially here in 2 Thessalonians 3, the apostle Paul spells out the form that discipline should take. He commands them to 'admonish the unruly' (1 Thes.5:14): in other words, giving a first admonition. Then he says 'keep away' (2 Thes.3:6): that being a measure of social ostracism if the admonition isn't heeded. 'Take special note' (2 Thes.3:14), he says: in what sounds like a public censure. Then comes the instruction 'not to associate with' (2 Thes.3:14) those who are disobedient: which must mean avoiding free and familiar fellowship with those who are unfaithful (v.15). Finally, and solemnly, he writes that they have to 'reject' (Titus 3:10) them: this amounts to excommunication as shown in 1 Corinthians 5, or when a brother is to be 'refused' after a second admonition.

I wonder if the practice of church discipline today has generally fallen into a measure of disuse? If so, the apostles were clearly of a different opinion. The logic of 2 Thessalonians 3 is clear: if there's to be obedience to the Word then we have a corporate responsibility (1 Thes.5:12-14) to carry out discipline, one in which church leaders take the initiative. Its character and tone, of course, is to be nothing other than friendly and fraternal, and it's always aiming at being re-constructive - always directed towards the goal of 'winning our brother'.

One final point, in sharing all this, Paul says (in v.6) that he's speaking 'in the name of the Lord Jesus'. Think about that for a moment. Nothing could demonstrate better Paul's self-conscious authority as an apostle of Christ. In fact, he expresses his confidence in an even earlier verse (v.4) when he says that the Lord will make sure that the Thessalonians will obey him! Of course, no-one has that kind of apostolic authority today. Instead, we submit to apostolic authority today by submitting to the New Testament. It still carries undiminished force. The apostolic tradition is the Lord's message as found in our Bibles - that's to be our full assurance, as it was Paul's and the Thessalonians'!

2. The Glory of the Christ

One outstanding feature of Paul's letter to the Colossians, if not *the* outstanding feature, is the full and detailed way it presents to us truths about the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a reason for this, of course. It was written, in part at least, as a response to the propaganda of a first century religious cult. It was written to warn Christians living in the Lycus valley (of Phrygia) about the errors of a particular false teaching which had spread there. The particular heresy in question combined some Jewish ideas with the idea of the worship of cosmic powers in the form of angelic beings. It was a distortion of the true connection between elements of the Law and angelic powers; the Law having been ordained and spoken through angels (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). One Bible expert believes the cult characterized these angelic powers as 'the elemental spirits of the universe' (F.F.Bruce; see Colossians 2:8,20; & also Galatians 4:3,9), based on wording which Paul himself uses.

The appeal of this angel-cult lay in promising you could reach a higher level of wisdom by treating your body harshly and having minimum contact with worldly things. Jewish ideas like observing the Sabbath and new moons were thrown into the mix. Cult followers believed these angelic powers, or world-rulers, even shared in the essence of the Godhead itself and had been involved in the creation of the world.

So this cult, which appears to have arrived on the doorstep of the Church of God in Colosse, launched a real attack on the very core of all Christian teaching – that which concerns the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. As early as the first chapter, the apostle Paul has been setting the record straight. In one sense we ought to be grateful to these cults, for they gave Paul the opportunity by the Spirit of God to give us one of the most magnificent and exalted descriptions of Christ in the whole Bible. From the twelfth verse, the glory of the Christ is set out like this:

[God's] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:13-20)

Not only is that a wonderful statement of the fact that Jesus Christ is the perfect visible representation of God, and the full embodiment of all the attributes of the Godhead, but this is a clear counter-attack on the teachings of that first century cult. Notice that Paul said all 'the fullness' of God resided in Christ. That was him using the jargon of that particular cult. 'Fullness' was one of its 'buzz-words'. It meant the totality of the divine essence. Remember, we've said that the cult-followers falsely claimed this was shared out with angelic beings whom God, they said, had used as his agents in creating the world. Oh no, Paul tells us, the sum of all the divine powers and attributes are contained in Christ, and through Christ - uniquely and alone - God created the world. Paul so wanted these Christians at Colosse, and at neighbouring Laodicea, to be sure of this that when we come to the second chapter we find Paul's prayer for them was:

That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge

I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument.

For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form. (Colossians 2:2-9)

There's that word 'fullness' again, with the repeated assertion that all the divine fullness - all its powers and attributes - reside in Christ. Paul also talked in terms of hidden wisdom and knowledge. Again he was choosing his terms carefully by the Spirit of God. Had not these cult-members prided themselves in the discovery of a higher spiritual wisdom as yet undiscovered by others? They're on the wrong track, Paul says, and they're looking in the wrong place, for it's all to be found in Christ.

Once again there's the ring of Christian confidence in this assertion regarding Christ. We spoke last time of Christian confidence in the authority of God's Word, the Bible. The Bible uses the same word, a word for 'full assurance', to describe the quality of Christian confidence we ought to have both in God's Word and in God's Son. And when we have this proper strength of biblical conviction about Jesus Christ, the Son of God - as we see him in all his glory in the Word of God - then that's a 'blessed assurance'!

To have this kind of assurance in Christ, despite the assaults of cults both ancient and modern, calls for the exercise of our God-given mental powers, for Paul speaks of: *the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of •Christ* (Colossians 2:2-3).

Then, a few verses later, he expands on this true knowledge of Christ we're to have full assurance and total conviction about. He says:

in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. And when you were dead in your transgressions, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees. (Colossians 2:9-20)

Notice again how Paul denounces in the same breath both the worship of angels and submission to legalistic decrees. He's still gunning for this heresy which blended these elements together. Paul shows how the cross, at the very heart of the Christian gospel, shatters these delusions. The glorious triumph of the Christ of the cross is the final answer to them. Paul opens a window for us on the cross here, indicating something of its profound effect in heaven within the ranks of the angelic orders themselves. Things in heaven were simply not the same afterwards he tells us in chapter one (v.20), and now adds: that through the cross Christ 'put off from himself' the angelic rulers and heavenly powers. It's the same word he uses when he describes believers as having put off from themselves their old self-nature and its corrupt practices.

The Lord Jesus himself described the cross as 'the hour' for the Son of Man to be glorified, when 'judgement' would come 'upon this world' and 'the ruler of this world' would be cast out (John 12:23,31). 'God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom' of God was effected through 'Christ and Him crucified' – something which the (world-)rulers of this age never understood, *for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory* (1 Corinthians 2:7,2,8). As Christ saw the cross loom large before him, he said *the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me* (John 14:30). No doubt this was a reference to Satan himself, otherwise described in the Bible as *the prince of the power of the air* (Ephesians 2:2).

What a cosmic victory Christ won through his death on the cross! He's the glorious Victor of a terrible spiritual battle that was hidden to human view in the darkness of his cross. The cross declares him to be the incomparable Christ. All things were created by him and through him and for him. And when this once perfect creation plunged itself into spiritual revolt against its creator, he came down to share in our humanity so that he might die sacrificially and rescue from sin all who put their trust in him. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says: Let all the angels of God worship him? who has become *much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they* (Hebrews 1:6,4). He became *for a little while lower than the angels* (2:7) and *for this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name* (Philippians 2:9).

In all we're saying, let's have the full and blessed assurance that *there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12). He, and he alone, is God's beloved Son, and we should hear and do what he says (Matthew 17:5).

3. The Hope of His Calling

Every believer can rejoice in the 'blessed hope' that's associated with *the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus* (Titus 2:13). The common hope of all believers on the Lord Jesus Christ is his soon return to take us to be with himself. In contrast to the dead-end hopes of this world which end at death, the Christian has what Peter describes in the Bible as *a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* (1 Peter 1:3).

The great thing about this hope of the believer's heavenly inheritance is that it's an absolutely certain hope, because it's all of God's grace. This 'salvation hope' is totally sure - it can't be made any more sure than it already is - because it doesn't depend on us, but only upon God and the once for all finished work of Christ.

Not everyone agrees with that. The fact that they disagree doesn't alter the truth of it as being the Bible's clear teaching, of course. But I understand why some people have a different view. Let me take you to one of the main Bible texts they use. No-one would dispute that it really does describe the danger of 'falling away'. But instead of that thought troubling us in relation to our eternal security - and leaving us to puzzle over a contradiction with other parts of the Bible (like John 10:28) - I want to share with you exactly what it was that early believers were in danger of falling away from. It certainly wasn't their salvation. That's a totally mistaken point of view, as we'll see once we read the verses in their proper context.

They are found in the Bible letter to the Hebrews. In chapter 6, the writer deals with *the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.* (vv.4-6)

There can be no doubt about the fact that these were genuine born-again believers. They'd had a very real spiritual experience which is evidenced to us in a number of ways. But they'd fallen away. The question is, of course, fallen away from what?

The letter to the Hebrews is not taken up with the hope of *our* calling (Ephesians 4:4), but it deals very fully with what is the hope of *His* calling (Ephesians 1:18), the hope of God's calling, that is, the hope or purpose God had in mind when he called us through the word of the gospel. There's a big difference between the two. The hope of our calling - our hope as those who have been called - is focused on the future: it's the return of the Lord to take us so we enter into our inheritance which is in heaven. By contrast, the hope of God's calling, as the Bible describes it, is all about the present earthly purpose God has in calling us. Parts of the Bible like the letter to the Hebrews explain what that purpose is. The Father is seeking worshippers. The letter to the Hebrews mainly describes how believers can be the kind of worshipping people God is looking for right now as we serve him on the earth.

The high privilege of being a spiritual kingdom (Heb.12:28) of priests (10:22) is a privilege God grants those who, for their part, seek to attain to God's full purpose in having called them. It's God's intention that we serve him together as a priestly people - how awesome is that! The solemn thing is that it's a privilege we can forfeit, a responsibility we can fall away from. It was the collective privilege of those believers whom we read of as serving in the New Testament churches of God. It was to that 'little flock' of disciples that the Lord promised the kingdom (Luke 12:32). But it was a kingdom, an inheritance from which they could be disinherited - as for example the immoral brother was at Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 5:13 & 6:9). And this is exactly the kind of falling away which the Hebrews' letter describes.

With the Hebrew Christians the issue wasn't immoral behaviour. But at that time, Christianity, in its first century Jewish cradle, was suffering a bad press. Actually, it was much worse than that. Some of these Hebrews who had become Christians must have been under intense pressure from their Jewish families to renounce their professed new-found faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. As a result some wanted to get out of the churches of God in which Christians were then associated, as recorded in the New Testament.

The writer to the Hebrews is appealing to them not to turn back, not to drift away, not to come short of God's purpose in their lives of service among God's people. The thing which would prevent them from falling away from their place among those New Testament churches of God was if they became 'fully assured' of what these churches constituted as far as God was concerned. If only they had a clear vision of the hope set before them in this letter, the hope of God's calling - his purpose in calling a people together to worship him on earth in relation to a high priest, Jesus, living for them in the presence of God. If only they had that vision, then they would be settled in their convictions. This is where we meet the word that's our focus in this series: the word translated 'full assurance'. Listen out for it now as the writer takes up his appeal again in Hebrews chapter 6:

we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in ministering to the saints. And we

desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end. (vv.9-11)

Hope developing into full assurance – the full assurance of what these churches constituted as far as God was concerned: a people for God's praise. Without that assurance, these first century Jewish believers were in danger of falling away from their place in New Testament churches of God by deciding to return to Judaism. To do that would bring such high profile damage to the Christian testimony of these churches that it would make it *impossible to renew them again to repentance* (v.6), that is, making return to the churches of God an impossibility for these defectors.

To be fully assured, and so not to fall away, these Hebrews were encouraged to become active in their faith: to become imitators of the saints who were actively ministering among them (v.10), as well as imitators of those who had showed patience under trial (v.12). The writer exhorts them: *that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

So they were encouraged to take hold of the hope 'set before' them like those who showed patience under trial had earlier taken hold on hope: the classic example being Abraham who held by faith to the hope that was promised him. Abraham maintained his assurance of hope in the grand scale of God's purpose for his family despite the smallness and barrenness of his immediate domestic circumstances. But God's purpose for these Hebrews, and the privileges associated with the 'little flock', seemed to have lost its lustre for them. It seems they had begun to think that living as a Christian compared unfavourably after all with living as a Jew like their fathers had done.

But the writer had a more specific point to make by directing their attention to their national founding father, Abraham. He says:

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you." in order that by two unchangeable things [that's the promise and the oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. (vv.13,14,18)

The promised blessing of Abraham, assured by God's oath, had come to the New Testament Hebrews, as it has come to us too, as believers in Christ Jesus. Like them, we're included as 'heirs of the promise' (v.17). That's what Paul says in Galatians (3:8,9,14). But what is this hope 'set before us' which we are to lay hold of? The hope of the Lord's coming? The hope of an inheritance reserved in heaven for us? No! The writer explains:

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (vv.19,20)

The writer draws their attention - and ours, too - to the long-promised blessing that was to be given through Abraham. God has now fulfilled his promise in Jesus Christ. Jesus is not only a living saviour, but he's a priestly intercessor. In resurrection, he's entered within the veil into God's very presence in heaven to intercede for us so that our lives of service might be preserved, so that our present privileges and future rewards may not be lost. But if we ourselves don't lay hold on that hope there's always the danger of coming short, or falling away, from God's purpose in our lives. So we see that it was to avoid falling away from the privileges that were truly theirs among God's New Testament people, that they needed to be fully assured about this matter of the hope or purpose God had in calling them. This, too, is a blessed assurance!

4. The Heart of Worship

In this chapter I'd like to share with you the last of four occurrences where we find the word meaning 'full assurance' in the New Testament of our Bibles. So far, we've already seen it used in connection with the authority of God's Word, and with the unsurpassed glory of Christ, God's Son. In the previous chapter, we were assured of the value to God when we keep the Apostolic Faith. The Word of God, the Christ of God, and keeping the Faith are all things God wants us to have real assurance about.

There's one more occurrence of this word in our Bibles. It's found a second time in the letter to the Hebrews, and it's used there in connection with one of the most wonderful revelations in the Bible - certainly one of the most wonderful that we can experience now. God wants those who are his people to have complete assurance about the experience that lies at the very heart of Christian worship. Hebrews chapter 10 verse 22 is so inviting when it says:

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

That's drawing near to God in worship. The qualification for a right approach to God in worship is stated here using the picture language of the Old Testament. We're told (Hebrews 9:9) that things connected with the service of God's earthly house long ago, the Tabernacle, form a parable for God's people today.

The priests in the days of Moses were sprinkled with sacrificial blood and washed with water before they could ever draw near to God in priestly service associated with the Tabernacle (Leviticus 8:6,30). That's the imagery used in our Hebrews' text: our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Those New Testament believers had the awesome privilege of being in a spiritual priesthood which answered to that of Aaron and his sons long ago. But this spiritual priesthood described in the New Testament is in fact capable of approaching God in the heavenly sanctuary. That holy place in heaven is known as the Holies, which answers to the second section of the Tabernacle long ago where the ark of the covenant was located.

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water, the writer says. It's an experience of the heart as it's set out here, hearts that have experienced the effects of the great once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Long ago, the high priest who had exclusive access surely entered the second section of the physical sanctuary with some degree of trepidation, for he was entering God's immediate presence when he passed through the veil to go into the innermost part of the Tabernacle. But the New Testament people of God can, with boldness, pass through the courts of heaven!

When, in the days of Moses, God descended upon Mount Sinai to prepare a people for service in his earthly sanctuary, the Bible tells us that fear and trepidation were very evident. And why not? We read that:

The mountain ... burned with fire, blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them any more, so terrifying was the sight. (Hebrews 12:18-21)

God came to meet them at Mount Sinai to further the purpose that would eventually lead to the establishing of a national centre for worship at Jerusalem, the place known as Zion. And, reading Hebrews, we have to say that if Israel's meeting with God at Sinai was an awesome experience, then our birthright as Christians is to experience its even more breath-taking counterpart!

For, contrasting it with Israel's approach before Mount Sinai, the writer goes on to explain to those Hebrew Christians in New Testament times: *you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to God the Judge of all, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant* (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Isn't that wonderful! What a revelation this is in our Bibles! A spiritual journey that brings the people of God, each week, into heaven itself - to the original Zion above, the centre of true Christian worship. Earthly Zion was only ever a copy designed to reflect characteristics of the true Zion in the presence of God above.

The Hebrews' letter even speaks of a tent, a tabernacle, which the Lord himself has pitched in heaven - that's the true sanctuary, not a copy of it like the one on the desert floor in the time of Moses (Hebrews 8:1 ff). Access to God was limited in those former days, only the high priest could go right through the Tabernacle and into God's presence in the holy place. And he could only do that once per year, and only then with the blood of animal sacrifices.

So here's something else by way of contrast, for the whole New Testament people of God are now encouraged to have:

boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus [and to] draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

But when does this experience take place? When does a spiritual priesthood today enter the heavenly holy place? There's a clear clue in the context of our featured text:

we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water• not forsaking our own assembling together (Hebrews 10:19-25).

In the New Testament churches we're told they 'assembled together' for the 'breaking of the bread'. That's when God's New Testament people came together to worship. They had before them the bread which focused their minds by symbolising Christ's flesh and the wine that symbolised his blood or death. Here it's stated that 'by the blood of Jesus' and 'through the veil of his flesh' they entered the holy place above where Christ serves as high priest. Yes, there's no doubt that this experience of entering the holy place in heaven is linked in Hebrews with the theme of the people's worship. And the worship we see in the New Testament takes place when the churches gather to break bread each week.

So who would want to forsake such an opportunity when by the symbols of the bread, signifying the veil that is to say His flesh, and the wine signifying his blood, we enter in upon the collective worship experience of the people of God today? Surely it's the Lord's intent that it takes place each week with the same simplicity as that inaugural occasion when the Lord broke bread with his disciples before going out to die. It's not designed to be a physically impressive performance – there are no biblical instructions about wearing special clothes or meeting in special styles of buildings - but as we realize from this Hebrews' letter something of the spiritual reality that's taking place then - we'd have to say that in these terms nothing else comes close to this in spiritual experience this side of heaven!

In the first century these Hebrews, including many former Jewish priests who'd become obedient to the Christian faith, had turned their back on ritual service, and priestly robes, and buildings on earth they had once regarded as sacred like the Temple at Jerusalem. How could they now look back longingly again on these things if they were looking up to the spiritual reality of entering heaven itself in their weekly worship among the churches of God?

God intended those early Christians to be so fully assured of drawing near to him in worship that he caused the apostle Peter to share a similar thought in his letter. Peter wrote in the second chapter of his first letter:

Coming to Him as to a living stone, chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices ... Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious" (1 Peter 2:4-7).

It's obvious he's talking about worship for it has to do with the offering up of 'spiritual sacrifices'. But he speaks about 'coming to Him' - that's the Lord - 'in Zion' – that's the heavenly city of Zion. Peter, too, saw the assurance of worshipping above as basic to what it means to function as God's spiritual house on earth now.

So, we've completed our biblical review of things God wants us to be fully assured about. This chapter has seen the assurance of worshipping in heaven added to that of the authority of God's Word, and the glory of Christ, and the keeping of the Apostolic Faith. The power of the Word, the glory of the Christ, the keeping of the Faith and the spiritual experience at the heart of worship are all things God wants us to have real assurance about!