

they had hard hearts (3:8) and did not understand God's ways (3:10). Hebrews summarized these as faithlessness (*apistia*) and sin (*hamartia*; see 3:12–13, 17, 19) and disobedience (*apeitheia*, 3:19). Rebellion, disobedience, sin, and faithlessness all go together. In contrast, Hebrews has applied a different set of terms to Christ. He is "apart from sin" (4:15), and "faithful" (2:17; 3:2, 6). It is entirely legitimate, therefore, for us to understand "obedience" in 5:8 in light of these sets of opposing characteristics, and to identify the obedience that Christ learned as a learning that is also integral to faith. In short, Hebrews would entirely agree with Paul's phrase, "the obedience that is faith" (*hypakoēn pisteōs*) in Rom 1:5 and 16:26. I develop this aspect of the verse in excursus 3 below.

Verse 9 is virtually an elaboration of 2:10, "It was indeed fitting that the one . . . in leading many sons to glory, should bring the pioneer of their salvation to perfection through suffering." Here we find the aorist participle *teleiōtheis* (lit. "having been made perfect"). If we read this in light of 2:10, we shall not conclude too hastily that Jesus' perfection resulted simply from his exaltation to God's right hand (*pace* Koester, 290), but was rather a result precisely of what he learned through his suffering. If we ask "what sufferings/experiences," the first thing we think of is Christ's passion. But the element of "learning" in this verse suggests that Hebrews has more in mind than Christ's last moments, more even than his experience of external affliction and rejection during his ministry. The author points to the sort of suffering that is consequent upon the way Jesus lived as a human, a corollary of the very faithfulness that was announced from the start, "Behold, I am here to do your will" (10:9).

The relationship of the participle *teleiōtheis* to the verb *egeneto* can be understood in several ways: "by being made perfect he became," or "after being made perfect he became," or "because he was made perfect he became": such is the flexibility of the Greek circumstantial participle. In any reading, the time of the participle precedes that of Jesus' becoming "cause of salvation" (*aitios sōtērias*) to others. The language here again picks up from 2:10, reminding us that the term *archēgos* in the earlier passage has as much the sense of "founder" and "cause" as it does "pioneer" and "leader." Of particular significance is that Christ becomes the cause of "eternal" (*aiōniou*) salvation. This is Hebrews' first use of the term "eternal" (see also 6:2; 9:12, 14, 15; 13:20). As with Paul (Rom 2:7; 5:21; 2 Cor 4:17; 5:1; Gal 6:8), Peter (1 Pet 5:10; 2 Pet 1:11), and John (John 3:15, 16; 5:24; 17:2; 1 John 1:2), the notion of "eternal" does not mean simply "everlasting," but more, a participation in the life that is God's own. Salvation, therefore, is more than possession of the land and success, it is "heavenly" (3:1; 4:14), transtemporal because also transmaterial.

This salvation is available to those who "obey him." The turn is striking, because we might have expected—in view of Christ's depiction as "pioneer of faith"—that Christ would be the source of salvation to those "who obeyed as he did" or "have the faith of Christ." Hebrews does strike this note, as we shall

see in our discussion of chapters 10–12, but it is important to note that in this passage, Christ's role as *aitios* of eternal salvation places him as the one who shares God's life and power. For Hebrews, Christ is certainly more than a human hero; he is Son of God. Christians therefore do more than imitate his example—they obey him. They approach him as Lord, seated at the right hand of the throne of majesty.

Jesus has been designated by God as high priest (5:10). We can note three aspects of this brief clause, which concludes the very long sentence beginning in verse 5. First, the verb *prosagoreuein* has the sense of being designated or named by another, therefore "recognized" as something (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.2.1; Wis 14:22; 2 Macc 1:36; Philo, *Abraham* 121). Second, Hebrews specifies that Christ is so designated, not by humans, but *hypo tou theou* ("by God"), thus making clear that Christ fulfills the criterion that a high priest be called by God (Heb 5:4). Finally, the author attaches the title "high priest" (*archiereus*) here to Melchizedek, even though the citation from Ps 109:4 merely designates "the Lord" as "a priest (*hiereus*) forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Excursus 3: Suffering and the Obedience of Faith

A close reading of 5:5–10, and especially 5:8, has suggested that for Hebrews the suffering endured by Jesus was essential to his education as a Son. Because this theme is critical to the Christology of this composition as well as its understanding of discipleship (see esp. 12:4–11), it is important to examine this provocative pronouncement more closely.

If Hebrews thinks of Jesus as "learning from the things he suffered," then it must have more in mind than the physical sufferings of Jesus' passion, even though the depiction of him pleading with the one "who could save him from death" evokes the Gospel accounts of Jesus' prayer before his arrest. It would be difficult to think how Jesus "learned" from the brutal moments before his death, unless we understood "learned obedience" in the sense of "learned what obedience really involved," or "learned the consequence of obedience." In this case, however, why speak of "learning" at all? Why not simply state, with Paul, that Jesus was "obedient, even unto death" (Phil 2:8)? It may well be, then, that the author of Hebrews is thinking of a learning that took place over the course of Jesus' human existence, and a learning that involved the very process of obedient faith. To explore this possibility, we must begin with careful attention to the phenomenon of suffering and a richer appreciation of the human response of faith.

Suffering is a matter of pain, and pain is the sign of a sentient system in disequilibrium. This fairly bloodless definition enables us to explore suffering in its several dimensions. When the subject of pain arises, we tend to think first of physical pain, and we understand that pain requires a sentient creature. A stone may "suffer blows" from a stick, but the stone—so far as we know—does not experience pain, and therefore does not "suffer from blows." We also tend to think of pain in negative terms: who wants to experience pain? Thus our instinct is to think first in terms of physical injury or disease or a wound inflicted by another.

But physical pain can also result from another form of systemic disequilibrium, such as is caused by growth or childbirth. The adolescent who grows five inches in a summer hurts all over. The athlete who grows muscles through training hurts. Mothers endure the great pain of labor in order to give life. In such cases the pain is no less real (or severe) yet it has a positive meaning. Pain is the corollary of an increase in life rather than the signal of a threat to life. Even physical suffering, then, can be positive as well as negative, at least in its results.

Precisely this realization underlies the Greek proverb *mathein pathein*. What applies in the physical realm applies also in matters of spirit (remember that ancient education closely linked physical, mental, and moral training). Thus, intellectually, the learning of new ideas is a form of growth: our minds expand to include new realities of which we had not previously been aware. The growth is good. But it is also painful, since it implies the disruption and rearrangement—and often the abandonment—of our previous mental furnishings. To enter into new mental territory means at least a partial death to old mental territory. Stretching the mind to encompass new truth means suffering the pain of mental disequilibrium. The same applies also to emotional “learning through experience.” Grief at the death of a loved one is terribly painful, and not something we would choose. Yet we understand that the avoidance of affection out of the fear of loss means an emotional truncation, and that the willingness to “learn through emotional suffering” means a deepening of our human capacity to feel and to feel with others that nothing else can teach. Can we not, on analogy with these forms of learning through suffering, suppose that the same sort of pain is integral to spiritual growth in the proper sense, that is, in the learning of God’s will as it pulls us beyond our present circumscribed grasp of reality?

To answer this question, we must look more closely at Hebrews’ understanding of the human response to God called faith. Faith in Hebrews means more than belief, although it certainly demands belief as its premise: “the one approaching God must believe that he exists and that he is the rewarder of those who seek him” (11:6). Faith in Hebrews also means more than hope concerning the future, although hope is an essential dimension of faith: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen” (11:1). And faith in Hebrews means more than perseverance, although that aspect of faith looms large in this composition: “we do not draw back—to our destruction. Rather, we have faith—to the securing of our life” (10:39). Faith in Hebrews is also a response to God that involves obedience.

The contrast between the people of Israel in the desert and Jesus is revealing in this respect. The wilderness generation that failed to meet its promised goal of the rest committed sin (3:13), was disobedient (3:18), and was faithless (3:12, 19). In contrast, Jesus is characterized as being “apart from sin” (4:15) and “faithful” (2:17; 3:2, 6), but these qualities are spelled out in terms of the obedience through which he was perfected (5:9). It remains, then, to ask how obedience is an essential dimension of faith.

With regard to Jesus, we see in chapter 10 that the Messiah declared on his entrance into the world, “Behold, I am here to do your will!” (10:9). But the will to do God’s will requires the overcoming of the internal resistance posed by one’s own will, a resistance that had to have been experienced even by the Messiah, who shared all the weaknesses of his brothers and sisters in the flesh (2:14–18; 4:15–16). If he was truly like us in every

respect “apart from sin,” we can conclude that he always did God’s will—and in this he was different from us; but in order to do God’s will, he had to overcome his own desires—and in this he was like us. Paradigmatically, when God called on him to die, Jesus had to overcome the most powerful of all human instincts, toward self-preservation, in order to hear that will and do it. We see in contrast that the sin and faithlessness of the wilderness generation consisted in their “testing” of God and “rebellion” against his “voice.”

Faith, then, is a deeply responsive hearing of God’s voice (will) as it comes to humans in the circumstances of their worldly existence. It is saying yes to a “call” (3:1) that leads them beyond their present world into a larger one defined not by their desire but by God’s creative and commanding word. Such faith is “obedience” because it is a hearing that overcomes the human reluctance to move into a larger and more frightening world, and the human preference to live within the comfort zone of the accustomed. It is important to note that for Christ as for other humans, such obedient faith cannot be accomplished once for all.

Such obedient faith, therefore, is itself a form of suffering. It is impossible to answer the call of any “other” and enter into the other’s project—even the call of spouse, student, child—without experiencing the stress of letting go of the absoluteness of what, until then, had been our own quite legitimate project. But if the call that summons us is God’s call, if the space into which we are asked to step is infinitely larger than the one we presently inhabit, then the pain of responding is commensurate with the stretching involved. But no human can step all at once into God’s will, for two reasons: the first is that God’s call is new every day; the second is that humans can dispose of their freedom only moment by moment. The suffering that is integral to the obedience of faith, therefore, is chronic rather than acute, a constant learning so long as one keeps responding.]

Even though Jesus as “Son” came into the world to do God’s will, the voice of God was new every day for him also. Like us, Jesus had to respond moment by moment, and therefore “learn obedience” precisely in and through the stress and pain generated by constantly allowing his present understanding of God and of God’s will to be challenged and relativized by the voice of God that he heard within the circumstances of his everyday life. Hebrews says that Jesus was “perfected” by this process of experiential learning. In what respect was he perfected, made mature, complete? Hebrews must mean that Jesus grew into his full identity as God’s Son. Although he came into the world as Son, he could only “finish” that project moment by moment, in every response of obedient hearing, and could be “perfected” completely only through the final yes to God in the suffering that is death.

Here is the distinctive way in which the author of Hebrews brings together his remarkably high Christology (Jesus is the “preexistent” Son of God) and remarkable emphasis on Jesus’ humanity (Jesus is like us in every respect, apart from sin). He understands Jesus precisely as growing into his stature as Son through the process of obedient faith, through a process of creative suffering. As human, Jesus progressively entered into the immensity of God’s presence, even within himself, as he responded to the call of God in his temporal existence. The moment of death, which to outward appearance is the ultimate closure to human possibility, was therefore in the case of Jesus the ultimate opening to the presence of God, an exaltation to the right hand of the throne of

glory. Since for Hebrews Jesus is the pioneer as well as the perfecter of such obedient faith (12:2), he has shown the path toward maturity also for all those “sons being led to glory” (2:14).⁵

5:11–6:12 Exhortation to Progress and Perseverance

Having announced the theme of the priesthood of Jesus in 2:17–18 and begun its development in 4:14–5:10, the author once more interrupts his exposition to exhort his hearers (cf. 2:1–4; 3:1, 12–14; 4:1, 11, 14–16) in 5:11–6:12, before picking up the thread of exposition once more in 6:13 and pursuing his argument without hortatory interruption until 10:19. Since this is the last exhortation before such a long stretch of argument, it is appropriately lengthy. It is also unusually severe.

The exhortation falls into four parts. The author begins by rebuking his readers for their lethargy and immaturity (5:11–14), and then states his intention to carry them toward maturity (6:1–3). He warns his readers about the dire consequences of apostasy and neglect (6:4–8), and encourages them to zeal rather than laziness (6:9–12). The careful balancing of elements throughout is suggested by the presence of the same adjective (*nōthros*, “lazy, lethargic”) in the first and last lines of the passage and points to a chiasmic arrangement. Although the section as a whole clearly forms a rhetorical unity, I divide it in the middle for the sake of more focused discussion of its parts.

The section 5:11–6:3, then, unfolds in two balanced stages that are also arranged chiasmically: *a*. they are lazy and need to be taught the basics (*tēs archēs tōn logiōn tou theou*); *b*. they should be mature (*teleiōn*); *b'*. the author will move them toward maturity (*epi tēn teleiōtēta*), *a'*. which requires getting past the basics (*tēs archēs tou Christou logon*). A further rhetorical feature is the way that the phrase *peri hou polys hēmin ho logos* in 5:11 (“our discourse concerning him is lengthy”) echoes the phrase *pros hon hēmin ho logos* in 4:13 (“to him is our account directed”). The section 6:4–12 also has two parts: in the first (6:4–8), the author issues a dire warning about falling away, but then shifts to words of gentle encouragement and reassurance (6:9–12).

5:11 Our discourse^a concerning him is lengthy and it is difficult to express, because you have become reluctant listeners. 12 For even though by this time^b you ought to be teachers, you again need someone to teach you^c the

5. For further development of this perspective, see L. T. Johnson, *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

elementary principles of God's oracles, and you have become in need of milk rather than^d solid food. 13 Now^e everyone who drinks milk is inexperienced in reasoning concerning righteousness. He is a child.^f 14 But solid food is for mature people, those who on account of habit have their moral faculties trained to distinguish between a good thing and a bad thing.^g 6:1 Let us therefore move on toward maturity, leaving behind the basic instruction about the Messiah, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God, 2 of a teaching^h about ablutions and imposition of hands, of resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment. 3 And we will do this if God allows.ⁱ

4 For it is not possible to renew again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and who have tasted the noble word of God and the powers of the coming age, 6 and who have fallen away, thereby in their own regard crucifying and mocking the Son of God. 7 For the land that drinks the rain frequently falling on it and brings forth a suitable plant for those on whose account it was cultivated shares in a blessing from God. 8 But the land that produces thorns and thistles is useless and close to being cursed. Its end is the fire.

9 Even though we are speaking in this way, beloved,^j we are confident concerning you of the better things belonging to salvation. 10 For God is not so unrighteous as to forget your labor and your love^k for his name that^l you have demonstrated, as you provided service and continue to provide service to the saints. 11 But we desire that each one of you demonstrate the same enthusiasm all the way to the end for the completion of your hope,^m 12 so that you not become sluggards, but rather become imitators of those who through faith and long-suffering inherit the promises.

a. P⁴⁶ and the original hand of D omit the definite article before *logos* (“discourse”).

b. Literally “on account of the time” (*dia ton chronon*), indicating that the hearers had been members of the community for at least long enough to create such an expectation.

c. Some MSS have the passive *didaskesthai* (“to be taught”) rather than the active *didaskein* found in the best witnesses. The pronoun *tina* is accented by some witnesses as interrogative and by others as indefinite. The phrase is probably best understood as an indefinite pronoun serving as the subject of the infinitival construction: “someone to teach you.”

d. Literally “and not solid food.” A number of important MSS (including P⁴⁶ and the original hand of κ) have no *kai* (“and”).

e. The Greek has the explanatory conjunction *gar* (“for”); to achieve some variety, I have translated with “Now,” which can have the same function in English.

f. D inserts the adverbial accusative *akmēn* to create the phrase “still a child.” My translation once more omits the conjunction *gar* in order to achieve a more natural English.