

# **Dr. David deSilva, The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 4, Reading Hebrews, Attune to Patronage and Reciprocity**

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This is Dr. David DeSilva in his teaching on The Cultural World of the New Testament. This is session four, Reading Hebrews, Attune to Patronage and Reciprocity.

In this lecture, we will look closely at the letter to the Hebrews, applying what we learned in the previous lecture concerning the cultural background of patronage, friendship, and reciprocity.

A surprising amount of attention is paid to these topics in the so-called letter to the Hebrews. God is presented throughout in terms of being a patron to the Christian community as, of course, the world more broadly. The language of grace doesn't just appear to close this letter.

We are familiar with, grace be with all of you, being a familiar way that Paul and other members of Paul's team, like the author of Hebrews, close their correspondences. Rather, God's favor and God's grace are thematic throughout the so-called letter. I say so-called letters because they really resemble a sermon more than a letter.

Think of how it begins, not so-and-so to this congregation's grace and peace, but rather with a sonorous opening worthy of the greatest preachers of Christian heritage. And it only closes like a letter, but most of it is heard like a sermon. Even the author speaks about what he is saying and what they are hearing, as opposed to what he's writing until the very end.

But God's favor emerges throughout the letter. It's shown in the son's incarnation and death. In Hebrews 2.9, we read that Christ tasted death for everyone by the grace of God as an expression of God's desire to benefit the people.

The author speaks about their having access to God's help all along their journey. He writes, let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need. God's throne itself is regarded as a fount of assistance.

It's the place where when we need something to persevere in our journey, we know right where to go, and we know that we'll get the help that we need. God has granted these disciples many gifts. In 6:4-5, we read that they have enjoyed the gifts of having once been enlightened, having tasted the heavenly gift, having received a

share of the Holy Spirit, having tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.

And God has yet more to give to the believers. The author urges them to see to it that no one fails to obtain the gift of God, the grace of God. Throughout Hebrews, the author holds out before the hearers those benefactions that God yet has for them in the future.

The promise of entrance into God's place of rest in 4:1, the promise of a heavenly homeland in 11:16, the promise of an abiding city in 13:14, the promise of an unshakable kingdom in 12:28, the promise of entering heaven itself in 9:24, the divine realm that lies beyond the visible earth and the visible heavens, that divine realm into which Jesus has already entered as a forerunner on behalf of the disciples. And in that place, they would enjoy the promise of better and lasting possessions kept for them in the abiding realm, according to Hebrews 10:34. Not only is God presented as a benefactor or actually a personal patron throughout Hebrews, but so is Jesus. Even though Jesus' work was also a manifestation of God's favor, it was, in fact, the Son who gave his life to redeem and restore the disciples.

So, we read in Hebrews 2:9 that Jesus was crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death so that by God's grace, he might taste death on everyone's behalf. And then, on the other side, at the closing of the sermon, Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. From the beginning to the ending, the author recalls the costliness of Jesus' favor toward the hearers.

The Son also seeks to assist the disciples. He is presented as one who helps the disciples in Hebrews 2:16-18. It is not angels that the Son helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Immediately prior to that, we read that the Son has given the gift of freedom from the fear of death and the slavery that results from this fear. Since, therefore, the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

In these many ways, the author presents Jesus as a benefactor who has given the most of himself and achieved great gifts, conferred great gifts upon the hearers. But, it is the mediation of Jesus that captures the attention of the author of the Hebrews

the most. He is presented, for the most part, as a sympathetic, great high priest who unfailingly secures timely aid from God the Father for the believers.

For example, in 4:14-16, we read, Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast our confession, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So, in this passage, the author speaks of Jesus not only as a broker. Remember how we talked about priests as bridge builders, not only as a broker between God and humanity, but as one who really understands, on the one hand, what it is to be human and the kinds of struggles and challenges that one faces as a human, and at the same time, one who knows what it is to be the sinless Son of God, and who therefore is a better place than anyone to secure favor from God, for he stands unblemished and perfectly beautiful in God's sight on our behalf. So the author also claims that Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him by means of his mediation and brokerage since he always lives now to make intercession for them. The author will reflect at length in chapters 7:1 through 10:25 on how Jesus mediates between human beings and God, repairing the broken relationship and allowing human beings to stand before God in the expectation of divine favor rather than the expectation of judgment and wrath.

If you were to read those chapters afresh with that in view, you would see just how much of Hebrews is concerned with thinking about the work of this bridge builder, Jesus, this Pontifex, this great high priest. The author gives equal attention to the obligation of gratitude that the believers have toward Jesus and toward the Father God, and the attention that the author gives to helping the believers find the motivation they need to respond to God out of gratitude, as opposed to responding to the challenges that beset them at the moment. As we've seen in our third lecture, our ancient reader would well understand the author's call for a suitable response.

We could look to Hebrews 12.28 for one example of this, although there are several. We see that the author will look to the fact of being benefited by God as the basis for some call to action. Since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us show gratitude through which we will serve God in a manner pleasing to him with reverence and godly fear.

Actually, the Greek there is *echomen kharen*, let us have grace, is a way one could translate it woodenly, but in this context, the context of pointing to the fact that we're receiving a great gift, *khares* must mean the flip side of showing favor, it's returning thanks in this context. Since we're receiving this incredible gift of an

unshakable kingdom, let us show gratitude. And that gratitude is the way in which we will offer to God service in a well-pleasing manner.

Also, in 10:19 and following, the author says, since we have the boldness to enter the holy places through the blood of Jesus, since we have this privilege, this unprecedented privilege in the history of God's dealing with humanity, let us do something in response, let us draw closer, let us take advantage of the gift that we've been given, and let us hold on firmly to our confession without wavering, because the one who promised is faithful. So, the author is calling upon recognizable reciprocity scripts again. We have been given this great gift; it's a sin not to take advantage of it, to fail to draw close to God, for example, by drifting off into the woodwork because we're afraid of our neighbors, and let's hold on to it firmly because of its value, let's hold firmly onto our confession, our testimony to this God and his benefits unwaveringly.

Now, the author is addressing addressees who are facing the challenge of whether or not to continue in this relationship of grace with Jesus and the God whom he represents. The addressee's situation seems to be very similar to the situation faced in 1 Peter. So, all that the author has said about the audience's experiences of being gifted by God, of being graced by God, and enjoying the brokerage of such a mediator as Jesus has proven to be is a part of his framing of the challenges that face the audience so that they will make a faithful response in the midst of these challenges.

We know a few things about the audience, not much, but a few things from the sermon itself. We know that they were converted as a result of hearing the gospel proclaimed and experiencing God's confirmation of the message of the gospel in manifestations of the Holy Spirit. We find that in chapter 2, verses 3 to 4, and in fact, the picture that the author gives us there is very similar to the picture that Paul gives us of his mission in Galatians 3:2 to 5, and 1 Corinthians 2:1 to 5, which is just another kind of connection between, or another reason to think that this sermon to the Hebrews comes from a member of Paul's team, and looks at the same kind of experience that converts of Paul's mission had.

We know that they were carefully socialized into a new way of thinking about their past life and their decision to convert, and the eschatological frame of God's judgment as the crisis par excellence to prepare for and survive. In 6:1 to 2, we find a kind of a catechism of topics that were part of their foundational training: repentance from dead works, faith toward God, eternal judgment, and the like. And we also know that at some point in the past, they acutely experienced the rejection and hostility of their non-Christian neighbors.

And here, I'll read a text from chapter 10, verses 32 to 34, where the author recalls these past experiences. Remember the earlier days during which, after you were

enlightened, you endured a hard contest with suffering. You were publicly exposed to reproaches and afflictions.

You also became partners of those being thus treated. For you showed sympathy to the imprisoned, and you joyfully accepted the seizure of your property, knowing that you possessed better and lasting possessions. As we explored together in the first and second lectures, the public imposition of disgrace, of shaming, was a principal strategy for exercising social control.

The members of the larger society around this pocket of Christians growing up in their midst were attempting to correct what they perceived as deviant knowledge and deviant behavior in their midst. And, of course, to dissuade others from being attracted to joining this deviant group. The presenting challenge reflected throughout the sermon has to do with giving up on God in the face of social pressure.

In 10:24 and 25, we find out that some members of this community or these communities have already abandoned the assembling of yourselves together. The author believes that the danger exists of drifting away because of these social pressures and because of the cost of continuing to live now as marginalized, unvalued members of this culture, residents in this city. Because of these challenges, there's the danger facing everyone in the community of drifting away from the message that they heard at their conversion, of neglecting the message spoken by Jesus and certified by God.

These are all to be found in specific scripture texts, for example, in 2:1 and 2:3 to 4. There is the danger of failing to trust the living God, turning away from the living God through distrust in chapter 3, verses 12 to 13. The author suggests there's the failure of failing to attain entry into the promised place of rest in chapter 4, verse 1. There's a danger of falling short in the same way that the wilderness generation fell short of the promised land on account of a failure of trust in 4:12. Again, toward the end of the sermon, the author talks about the danger of growing weary or losing heart or, again, falling short of attaining God's gift in 12:3 and 12:15. In probably the most famous warning passage of Hebrews, Hebrews 6:4 to 8, the danger of failing to bear fruit for God through persistence and continued investment in one another. If it's true that repeated emphasis in an ancient document shows us what's really at the core of the problem being addressed, we see that the pervasive emphasis of Hebrews falls on the question of perseverance.

Will these disciples succumb to a faltering in commitment, or will they continue to move forward in the same direction in which they started when they first joined themselves to the Christian movement with the same confident boldness that they formerly displayed when their neighbors rejected them in the most fierce ways that they seem to have experienced? As some individuals in these churches or in this particular congregation grew more aware of the price than the prize, they began to

draw away from open association with the Christian community. That's reflected in 10:24, and 25. To the non-Christian neighbors, withdrawal of this kind would be seen as a good thing, as a step toward recovery that their neighbors would have been quick to affirm.

There is a way out of shame. There is a way out of disgrace in these situations. Now, the author probably doesn't know firsthand how widespread or how deep this faltering in commitment runs, but he sees the warning signs in the activity of the very few, as well as the warning signs in the lack of vigor with which the community went after the few or tried to dissuade the few from defecting and returning to the bosom of the host society.

So, the author's strategy, his pastoral strategy, is to focus the hearers on what they have received already from God, the benefits that they have gained, and what they have in Jesus so as to awaken gratitude and commitment, to keep responding gratefully, and to arouse fear of showing ingratitude to so generous, but also so powerful, a benefactor. So, let's think together about Hebrews as a whole as a summons to grateful response and to show proper gratitude for immense favor. The author calls upon the hearers throughout this sermon to continue to bring honor to their patron by bearing witness to what they've received from God, what they hope yet to receive from God, and therefore bearing witness to their connection with God through Jesus Christ.

In 10:19 through 23, once again, we read, since we have the boldness to enter the holy places by Jesus' blood, let us hold on firmly to the profession of our hope without wavering because the one who promised is faithful. In the very next verse, he says, don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some. So, in this passage, the author is calling the hearers to keep bearing witness to, and thus bringing honor to their divine patron by openly showing themselves to be related to that patron, and not being ashamed of that connection with that divine patron through the Son, Jesus Christ.

There is a social reason to be ashamed of that connection. It has lost them honor in the sight of their neighbors. It has cost them their status in their city and in their community.

But, the author says costly gifts merit costly gratitude and costly loyalty. Shortly thereafter, he'll say, remembering the former days, remembering the boldness that you had when the society around you came down on you, shamed you, insulted you, reproached you, you didn't give in. And the extent of boldness was this: even if you yourself weren't targeted by your neighbors, you went out of your way to show solidarity with the Christians who were targeted.

So, you painted a bullseye on your own back. So confident were you in Jesus that when your Christian friends were subjected to imprisonment, probably on some sort of specious charges, the legal system could be manipulated by group hatred quite well in the ancient world. You didn't hold back so that you wouldn't come under fire. You went to them, and you took their help, assistance, food, company, and encouragement and thus painted a broad target on your back as well.

So, the author says, don't throw away your boldness, for it holds great reward. Boldness here, in Greek, *parousia*, is a recognizable term for speaking your mind, for holding fast to and giving voice to your convictions. *Parousia* was a virtue in Greek democracy.

It was what free people did in a democracy. And it's what brave people did in the face of tyranny that tried to silence resistance or alternative opinions. And so, the author is saying, keep showing that kind of *parousia* through your actions, through your connections with your fellow Christians, through your refusal to be cowed by the tyranny of the non-Christians around you.

And he writes toward the end of the sermon in 1315, through Jesus Christ, let us keep offering to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that profess God's name. Here, he's talking about one kind of response, one kind of return that the recipient of divine favors can give to the God who needs nothing. We can at least keep telling people about what God has given us.

We can keep professing the goodness of this God, even when it's costly. So let's keep on doing that, the author says. This profession of gratitude and connection takes the shape of continuing to gather publicly with the Christian assembly, that is to say, with the circle of God's clients in Jesus Christ.

And we've already looked at that verse together. The author is calling for continued loyalty to Jesus, even though that loyalty is admittedly costly. We saw that Seneca had talked about this as part of the ethos of reciprocity.

I'm going to stay true to my patron or true to my friend, even when it brings me into places of social shame or marginalization. The author of Hebrews calls for exactly the same thing. Jesus suffered outside the gates in order to consecrate the people through his own blood.

Therefore, let us go outside the camp to him, carrying the disgrace he bore. What is part of this return of gratitude that we owe the Son, who not only gave his life for us, but gave his life in a way that also gave away all of his honor in the eyes of society? We owe it to him to do the same, and we give it right back to him. That's the costliness of the loyalty we owe.

So, if our loyalty to Jesus means we are now outside the camp, we have been socially kicked outside of our old networks and our city, that's part of simply giving back to Jesus as he's given to us. That's not too high a price to pay. It's what we owe him.

This is a straightforward reciprocity script. The same may be operative in another passage in Hebrews, Hebrews 12, three to four, where the author writes, consider him, Jesus, who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The underlying logic might be to think about what Jesus endured for you. You haven't begun to go there for him. He was crucified for your sake.

He was subjected to the ultimate disgrace for your sake. You haven't shed a drop of blood for him yet. So don't even think about giving up on him.

That would be shameful. That would be that would be to fail miserably in your obligation to your patron. The author also urges ongoing trust in a reliable benefactor.

If the Christians were to defect now, they would, in effect, be saying what God's promised: God either won't deliver or isn't worth holding on to. I would rather have the friendship of my non-Christian neighbors. The author calls the Hebrews to the contrary, to keep trusting God even though it's taking some time to arrive at the benefits promised for the future.

So, he writes in 3:12, look out, brothers and sisters, lest there come to be in any one of you a wicked distrustful heart which manifests itself in turning away from the living God. Because you didn't, you weren't confident in God's ability to bring you to the good promised end of the benefits he has for you. And in 6:12, he urges, don't become sluggish but rather become imitators of those who, through patient trust, inherit what God has promised.

Throughout the sermon, these injunctions are to keep trusting, to keep showing peace, and to have faith in the God who promised to emerge. For example, in 10:23, let us hold firmly to the profession of our hope without wavering. Why? For the one who promised is reliable.

And slightly later in chapter 10, we don't belong to the company of those who shrink back unto destruction, but we belong to the company of those who trust unto the securing of our souls. This leads then on to the famous chapter on faith in Hebrews, Hebrews 11, which talks all about how people who have trusted God's promise act in this world, and which also bears witness to the essentially everlasting praise and fame, honor, which came to such people, right? We only talk about Abraham and



Moses and the other heroes of faith in that chapter because they trusted God and didn't give up trusting God when it seemed that they had to embrace a lower status for some time, like Abraham became a sojourner when he was perfectly at home in Ur of the Chaldees and had an established life there.

Or Moses, who left the palace of Pharaoh to share in the ill-treatment of the people of God. Even the famous saying, I mean, when I was growing up, the only verse from Hebrews, well, two verses from Hebrews I memorized, right? Hebrews 11, 1, and then this one, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, or into eternity. Even that statement, that famous verse, is a statement about trust and trustworthiness.

It's not really about the eternity of the Son of God. It's about the fact that you can count on Jesus to do tomorrow what he promised yesterday. Dio Chrysostom, who was an orator and a statesman, and after his exile, a philosopher, who died probably around 120 AD, if memory serves, he wrote that the reason we have trouble trusting people is that we never know if a person will prove to be the same tomorrow as he was today.

In that environment, this statement about Jesus is a statement about being able to count on Jesus. We know he's the same today as he was yesterday, and he'll always be that. What he has promised, what his character is, and what he will do for us and longs to do for us will never change.

That's the bedrock that we can keep building on. So, all of these verses are about continuing to trust and, therefore, remain loyal to the divine patron and the broker, the mediator, Jesus. The author also urges the hearers to keep offering to God and to Christ the service that is their due.

Again, as with the socially inferior client and the socially, politically, and economically superior patron, the client really can't repay a favor in kind, but the client can do things for the patron that won't ever match the gift given but will at least match the spirit of mutual favor that should exist, the spirit of trying to advance the other's interests that should exist in this kind of relationship. And so, it is with God. All the ancients, whether they're Greco-Roman, Jewish, or Christian, know we can never repay God or the gods for the gifts that we've been given by them.

But that doesn't free us from the obligation to give them all the honor and all the worship and service that we can. So, having just called for the sacrifice of praise, of continuing to bear witness to God and thus increase God's honor in the unbelieving world, right after that, the author says, let us not forget to do good and to share what we have, for sacrifices of these kinds are pleasing to God, as Hebrews 13.16. We can't give God anything because he needs nothing, but God loves it when we give

to each other as any has need. And so, we can offer God as a giving back to God, as a kind of small return for his generosity, we can give to each other.

We can offer help. We can offer material resources as any sister or brother has need. And God counts that as a gift to him, a sacrifice that will be pleasing in his sight.

Earlier in Hebrews 6:10, the author says, God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. Here, the author is calling attention to the fact that what Christians do for each other because they've experienced the love of God, and because the love of God impels them, or the love of Christ impels them, God knows that that kind of mutual assistance and support is given as a gift to God. And he is not an unjust God.

As the Christians keep investing in each other, especially in this difficult situation, as we've described, that the audience of Hebrews faces, God will count that as a grateful return and will therefore continue to bestow favor upon clients who have shown themselves to be noble, to know how to value a gift. And then in Hebrews 10:19-24, since we have the boldness, since we have received this gift of confidence to enter the holy places by Jesus' blood, to go where no Levitical priest has been able to go before, let us consider one another unto an outpouring of love and good works. You know, again, the reception of such unprecedented gifts from God should impel us to serve as God would have us serve, which, as it happens, isn't serving to God's direct benefit but is serving to give as God would have us give, to benefit the rest of God's children.

Thus, keep building up the Christian community and empowering every sister or brother whom the society might be targeting to persevere in his or her loyalty. Now, there's another side to Hebrews. On the one hand, he urges a full-blooded, grateful response to God of honoring, of remaining loyal, and of serving.

On the other hand, he's got the stick down pretty well, too, warning the Christians against ingratitude. And a great deal of Hebrews, Hebrews 3:7-4:11, 6:4-8, 10:26-31, really uses the topic of ingratitude and the danger of ingratitude, the ugliness of ingratitude, to motivate a grateful response, such as we have been talking about. So, to start with Hebrews 3:7-4:11, the author is urging the hearers to keep valuing the gifts they have received, to keep showing loyalty, and to keep trusting and moving forward toward God's gifts.

And he looks at an example of people who failed to do that very thing. You're no doubt familiar with the story of the Exodus generation, on whose behalf God sent plague after plague upon Egypt, eventually won them deliverance, and through Moses led them out from slavery in Egypt on the way to a land of promise that God said he would give them. And God showed some pretty impressive miracles of

deliverance along the way, such as parting the Red Sea so that they could walk through on dry land.

And if that wasn't good enough, crashing the sea down on their opponents as they pursued, supplying manna and quail and water in the middle of the desert, and just lavishing gift after gift, an act of timely help after timely help upon this generation. And what happens? They get to the threshold of the promised land, and they send some folks in, one representative of each tribe, to scout out what it's going to look like to take this land. And the report of the majority reports of these scouts, I guess the Canaanites would call them spies, would be, there's no way we're going to take this land.

No, no. These are walled cities and well-trained, heavily armed soldiers. We're not taking this land.

So, the upshot of this report is the people believe that God lied to them. The people cease trusting their divine benefactor. They basically say we don't want to go forward toward what God promised he would give us because clearly the cost is too high.

And there seems to be no guarantee that he's going to be able to come through for us. So, we're going to elect a new leader and go back to Egypt. And at least there we knew where our next meal was coming from.

Well, God's response to this in Numbers 14 clearly shows the response of an affronted benefactor. God is aware in Numbers 14 of how many times he showed these people he could deliver them and how many tokens of his goodwill, his favor toward them, he has granted. And now he is provoked because they have decided he can't be trusted.

And so, they're not going to, not only are they not going to trust him, they're not going to obey him. They're not going to move against the Canaanites. They're going to take an entirely different approach to secure their future.

So, God's response is a response of anger, the anger of the affronted benefactor. And the result is the exclusion of that whole generation, with the exceptions of Caleb and Joshua, the only two spies to say, come on, God's on our side, we can take him. The exclusion of that whole generation from the promised favor.

They will not enter my rest as I swore in my wrath. The author then makes an obvious connection with his addressees. We don't want to be like them.

We, too, have experienced amazing divine favors. We've experienced the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We've seen God's power at work in our midst.

And we've heard the good word of God that says, I am bringing you through Jesus to a land of promise, to an eternal homeland, an abiding city. We don't want to be like the Exodus generation and, at the very threshold of entering into that promise, trip up by saying to our benefactor that we don't trust you. We think the opposition is actually too tough.

And so, we're going to give up. In a similar vein, the author returns to this topic of, please don't show ingratitude to so powerful a benefactor on at least two other occasions in this letter. In Hebrews 10:26 to 31, we read that if we sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearsome prospect of judgment and a fire that is eager to devour the contrary.

Anyone setting aside Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you suppose that person will deserve who tramples on God's son, who treats the blood by which he or she was sanctified as ordinary, and who insults the spirit of grace? In this passage, we notice a few things. I mean, first, sinning willfully here isn't in the context of the sermon, just any old sin we might commit willfully.

He has a sin that is a very specific sin in mind. He's just talked about two verses earlier. Those people who have begun to forsake the assembling of yourselves together.

Those people who, because of their neighbor's lack of affirmation, let's put it better, because of the shame that their neighbors have heaped upon them, have decided that the acceptance and friendship of the world is more valuable than the acceptance and friendship and the promises of God. This is a willful sin, the author says. You're not just making a wise decision.

You are saying to God, your gifts and your promises are not worth what they cost to keep. I am not moving forward. I am not continuing to press against the resistance that I need from the people who don't know you.

It's not just giving up, either, according to the author. It is trampling on God's son. It is treating the blood of Jesus, which sanctified the Christian, as worthless, as simply so much blood of an ordinary man.

It is a returning insult to the divine spirit that bestowed favor. And thus, using these images, the author really frames what could look like a sensible decision. We're just not getting on well as Christians in this city anymore, and maybe we made a mistake.

He's reframing that in terms of the Christian's own experience of divine favor. If you turn back on him now, what are you really saying? You're saying Jesus doesn't

deserve the honor of enduring hardship for him. You're saying his blood spilled for me isn't worth my spilling any blood for him or less.

You're saying that the way God has graciously received you with favor and outstretched arms is something you're willing to slap in the face to return insult for. So obviously, the author of Hebrews uses these scripts very effectively to make a Christian think twice about gaining temporary relief by returning to the bosom of the unbelieving society. This brings us, of course, to Hebrews 6:1 to 8, which is, as I've said, probably the most worked-over and famous warning passage in Hebrews.

It's kind of like a theological storm center in some circles, and we'll come to that very shortly. Hebrews 6:1 to 8 follows a pretty straightforward course of argumentation. In Hebrews 6:1, the author proposes a course of action that he wants all Christians to take.

Leaving behind then the foundational principles of Christ, let us be carried along to the end point of our journey. Remember, that's what the wilderness generation didn't do. They stopped at the threshold before the end of their journey.

The author doesn't want that for the Christians, so he's saying, let's press on to the end. Pressing on in the path of commitment rather than shrinking back, turning away, or abandoning the church. And he supports that call to action with an argument from the contrary.

What would it mean if we don't press on? What would it mean if we didn't persevere in the Christian faith? And so, we read in 6: 4 to 8, it is impossible to bring once again to the starting point of repentance those who have been decisively enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and who have tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, and who fall away since they crucify Christ afresh to their own hurt and hold him up to public disgrace. Now, we should note that the author is not presenting these hypothetical individuals in terms of those who have been saved or those who have the appearance of having been saved but aren't really saved or any such construct. I've read many articles where that's the question.

Is the author describing people who are saved? Let me just be upfront here. The author of Hebrews doesn't speak of salvation as a present reality at all at any point in the sermon. Unlike Ephesians, the author of Hebrews only talks about salvation in terms of the future.

The angels are ministering spirits sent on behalf of those who are about to inherit salvation in 1:14 or possibly 1:13. Later, toward the end of chapter 9, Jesus, who came once for all to deal with sins, will appear a second time for the salvation of those who eagerly are waiting for him. So, all that to throw out, I would like to let

different scriptural authors present these concepts on their own terms. And so even to talk about the individuals in 6:4-5 as people who are saved or aren't saved or look saved but aren't saved is using language that the author of Hebrews just doesn't ever use.

They're people who stop on the way to salvation, as far as he's concerned. They're people who throw away the deliverance that God has prepared for them because they slap Jesus in the face. How does he present them? He presents them rather as the recipients of shower after shower of divine gifts and favors.

He shows these people how ugly it would be to fail out, sorry, and to fail to live out a grateful response. Notice just the English, I guess, represents it pretty much as well as the Greek. But in Greek, there's participial clause after participial clause describing these people as the audience receiving gift after gift from God.

These are not ordinary gifts, but having a foretaste of the powers of the age to come and a share in the Holy Spirit and what you have. And these people turn around and hold up Jesus to public disgrace, crucifying him again in effect by saying with their neighbors, you're right, you're right. He's not the son of God worth dying for.

He's just a criminal who died on a cross and doesn't deserve anything more from me. How ugly such a response would be. So, he impresses upon the hearers that if we do anything other than press forward to the end of our journey, as he says in 6:1, we're bringing public disgrace upon our benefactor and showing public contempt for his costly gifts.

So, it should be unthinkable from the perspective of having been so gifted and at such great cost to the giver, Jesus, who was crucified on our behalf, not to continue in loyalty and trust. The basic cultural assumption here, undergirding the author of Hebrews just as much as it would a writing of Seneca or Diocritus, is that those who honor their benefactors are all people regarded as worthy of favor. But those who insult their benefactors will by nobody be esteemed to deserve a favor.

Hence, the author claims it's impossible to restore such people to the starting point. How are you going to approach God again for a fresh start after having enjoyed so many gifts from him, such unmistakable favors from him? After that, he spit on his son like those who say our neighbor's friendship is better than God's friendship. How is there a return to favor from that? Then the author moves on in 6, 7 to 8 to support his call to action and support this argument from the contrary with an argument from analogy, from agriculture.

And so, we read, ground that drinks in the rain that keeps falling upon it and bears vegetation that is useful to those on whose behalf the ground is being cultivated

receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is proven worthless and on the verge of being cursed. Its end is to be burned over.

Now, of course, there are some clear Old Testament resonances in these verses. Thorns and thistles, for example, in connection with a curse, recalls Genesis 3:17 to 18, where after Adam and Eve's prototypical transgression, the ground is cursed because of their sin and will bear thorns and thistles and be worked to be fruitful only with great difficulty. And the opposition of blessing and curse in the context of covenantal language, of course, recalls Deuteronomy actually as a whole, but in particular, Deuteronomy 11:26 to 28.

But we should also bear in mind that this agricultural language has a whole other set of resonances in the world of the first hearers. Resonances with the social context of reciprocity. Agriculture is often the go-to place for an analogy for giving well and returning well.

Thus, in Seneca, we read a number of examples. We do not pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts. This is, by the way, in the context of his explaining why gifts often don't bear the proper fruit of gratitude that we'd expect.

It's because we don't pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts. We don't sow seeds in worn-out and unproductive soil, but we give or rather throw away the benefits without any discrimination. So, we kind of get back what we deserve.

Later in this text, we ought to take care to select those to whom we would give benefits since even the farmer does not commit his seeds to sand. And again, when he urges givers to take a risk on a potential recipient, not to wait for proof, but just to look for a few good signs and take a risk, he writes, we never wait for absolute certainty concerning whether or not a recipient will prove grateful since the discovery of truth is difficult. But we follow the path that probable truth shows.

All the business of life proceeds in this way. It is thus that we sow. Who will promise the sower a harvest? And in the context of urging a giver to keep giving even to someone who hasn't really shown himself or herself grateful yet, he writes, the farmer will lose all that he has, sorry, all that he has sown if he ends his labors with putting in the seed.

It is only after much care that crops are brought to their yield. Nothing that is not encouraged by constant cultivation from the first day to the last ever reaches the stage of fruit. In the case of benefits, the same rule holds.

One could also find similar sentiments in Jewish texts, such as the sentences of pseudo-facilities. Do no good to a bad person, and it's like sowing seed into the

ocean. Even reaching way back to the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1 to 7, we see a lot of these dynamics at work.

The complaint of the one who plants the vineyard is that it produces after all of his care, after putting in the vines and dressing them and building a fence and building a tower and all this work cultivating it, it yields sour grapes instead of grapes that are useful and beautiful. And God says this is the way Israel was. I gave all, I lavished all this care upon Israel. What do I get? Instead of justice, an outcry.

So, returning then to Hebrews 6:7 to 8, we see in this analogy really a kind of restatement of Hebrews 6, 4 to 6. These recipients, sorry, these Christians have been the recipients of shower after shower of blessing. God's reign of favor has fallen upon them again and again. Now, if they bear vegetation that is useful for the sake of those for whom God was cultivating them, they'll be blessed.

But if all they do is bear thorns and thistles to prick the sides of the God who benefited them, all they can hope for is a curse. An interesting thing is that in the very next paragraph, we find that the kind of fruit that we're supposed to bear is the fruit that benefits our sisters and brothers in Christ, thus enabling them to persevere in loyalty to their divine patron. So, by way of recap, the argument in this passage is first, the author proposes a course of argument.

Let's keep pressing on to the end, responding to God with unfailing trust, loyalty, and gratitude. 6:4 to 8, because we really can't do anything else if we, at this point, turn away from God and say to our neighbors, our non-Christian neighbors, you are right; Christ's friendship isn't worth what it costs me to keep. Then we've done something unspeakably ugly and have exchanged God's favor for nothing other than the expectation of wrath at the end.

Then, the following paragraph, 6:9 to 12, affirms the hearers insofar as they have to that point mirrored the good soil. They have shown love and done good for each other. Remember 10, 32 to 34, even when some of their number were in prison, they went out to them.

They encouraged risk on their own heads to give encouragement and material assistance to the Christians whom society had most targeted for shaming. So the question facing the audience here is, what kind of beneficiaries will they continue to be? Base or honorable? Ungrateful or reliable? Will they prove to be fruitful soil and thus receive the greater gifts yet to come as suitable recipients of God's ongoing favor? Or will they prove to be bad soil in the end, which brings forth an unpleasant and even hurtful response? Now, I said that this passage is kind of a hotbed for theological debate, especially around the topics of unpardonable sin and eternal security. Either way you go, you can really wrestle with this text.



So, in a number of, in a lot of articles and commentaries, I find that this is where the question focuses. Does the text identify the truly unpardonable sin, the act after which there just is no future with God? On the other hand, for those who hold to eternal security, the question is, how do we massage this text to fit it in with our doctrine since it seems to suggest that a person can lose his or her salvation? Now, we've kind of already addressed the last part of that because to even raise the question of losing one's salvation to the author of Hebrews means you're going to take Ephesians' use of the language of salvation and insist that the author of Hebrews speaks on those terms when he clearly does not. Nevertheless, what I find to be really helpful about the cultural background here is that it leads us to say, hey, both questions are wrong.

Both concerns are violating the ethos of grace. You may have already picked up from lecture number three, but let me make explicit the fact that there are conflicting rules that govern givers and recipients. Seneca almost delights in the paradox of saying the giver should think this way, but the recipient should think entirely the opposite way.

So, for example, the one, the giver, should be taught to make no record of the amount given. The other, the recipient, to feel indebted for more than the amount. In the case of a benefit, he writes, this is a binding rule for the two who are concerned.

The one, the giver, should immediately forget that it was given. The other, the recipient, should never forget that it was received. He says, let the giver of a benefit hold his or her tongue.

So, as a giver, I should never say, yeah, I helped out so-and-so. Let the recipient talk to bear witness to the generosity of the giver. Late in his book, he writes, you know, when a recipient has looked for some occasion to make a return but hasn't found that occasion yet because of the vastly superior resources of the giver, the one, the giver, should consider that he or she has received the return already for his or her benefit because the client has been so watchful, just unsuccessful.

While the other, the recipient, should know that he or she has not returned it. The giver should release the other while the recipient should feel himself or herself bound. Now, in this kind of environment, it's clear you really just can't peg down the other party.

For the giver to assume what the should do would lead to ugliness. Well, I don't have to really return this benefit because the giver, if he's going to be noble, shouldn't be remembering it anyway. As soon as you think about that, you've just defaced the entire quality of the relationship.

So, it is with a lot of arguments about internal security, for example, as soon as we say, well, you know, there's nothing we can do that so generous a giver as God will cause so generous a giver as God to take back what he's given. In doing that, we have done a very non-first-century thing, something that would have been unthinkable to any first-century person. We have said, I, the recipient, am going to presume upon what the giver is supposed to do.

The first-century recipient of favor knows, well, what the giver is supposed to do, but the first-century recipient of favor knows that he or she needs to keep his nose in his business or her business of responding well and responding gracefully and is not going to presume upon grace. So, there's a great danger there. But there's another danger on the other side, the side of the unpardonable sin, and using this passage to say, yep, it's there, and we've got to be careful not to do it because there's something we can do that will make God never forgive us.

That's presuming the other way of presuming that, in fact, a giver isn't always free to give and that the generosity of a giver might always surmount the failure of a client to be grateful. Going back to Seneca, one last time, I promise, he gives this advice to givers, namely to imitate the gods. Of course, we've got to be careful most of the time and give to people whom we know to be virtuous, but darn it all, the gods show us how to give perfectly.

They give without any thought, even of the virtue of the giver, sorry, the virtue of the recipient. So perfect, so unrestricted is their giving. So, while recipients of favor are taught never to fail to return gratitude, since ingratitude should be expected to exclude one from all future favor, givers are taught to think differently.

So, Seneca writes, although we ought to be careful to confer benefits by preference upon those who will be likely to respond with gratitude, there are some benefits that we shall give even if we expect from them poor results, and we shall bestow benefits upon those who we not only think will be but have been known to be ungrateful. So and so has not repaid me with gratitude. What shall I do? Seneca says, do as the gods do.

They begin to give benefits to those who know them not and persist in giving them to those who are ungrateful. Let us imitate them. Let us give, even if many of our gifts have been given in vain, let us give even to those at whose hands we have suffered loss.

If a person is ungrateful, even to that person I shall give a second benefit and even as a good farmer overcomes the sterility of the ground by care and cultivation, I will be the victor. It is no proof of a noble spirit to give a benefit and lose it. The proof of a noble spirit is to lose and still to give.

Now, as I said before, givers and recipients know both sides of this dialogue. They are in on the two very different perspectives, but for the most part, they seem to be able to respect which perspective should apply to them in any particular case. The recipient doesn't presume upon the fact that givers should be generous regardless.

Givers don't bank on the fact that recipients are supposed to make certain returns. And so, I would suggest these theological positions both cross a line that a first-century hearer of this text would know ought not to be crossed. The doctrine of eternal security crosses the line by teaching recipients, even if unintentionally, to presume what the giver will do rather than focusing the recipients on what they ought to do to make a fitting response to such marvelous gifts.

The idea of unpardonable sin or losing salvation irreparably crosses the line by presuming upon what the giver will not do and, in many cases, giving bad counsel accordingly. In conclusion, I would want to impress upon you that a central, core value in the world of New Testament authors is this. Grace must answer grace.

Favor must lead to gratitude and a grateful response. This cultural background, I believe, provides the key to holding together declarations in the New Testament concerning God's grace and what God has given with instructions in the New Testament about how the Christian is to live in response, in an unbreakable bond. That is to say, if we remember God's grace in the context of the dance of grace, we might begin to get this vision for how God works to transform us.

He encounters us as sinners, but he lavishes his favor upon us. Reconciliation, reinstatement, and even adoption into God's family as God's own sons and daughters on the basis of Jesus' mediation on our behalf. This incredible outpouring of love and this incredible demonstration of generosity arouses gratitude and love in return in the heart of the disciple who is going to prove to be, in fact, a disciple who is receptive to grace, who receives grace well.

And therefore, my life as a disciple is suddenly different because the driving force is how do I live for him? How do I give back to God the honor that matches his generosity, the loyalty that matches his love, the service that matches his gift? Now, of course, it'll never equal out, but that's the whole point. I live my whole life for him because, in the words of the hymn, love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all. Or to return to that text from Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:15, he died for all, Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised on their behalf.

There's a text that never makes it into the Romans road. Well, it kind of can't because it's from 2 Corinthians, but I believe that is a core paving stone in the road of Pauline theology and discipleship. Paul himself knows that response as he writes in Galatians; it's no longer me living, but Christ living in me.

What I now live in the flesh is that I'm living by trust in the Son of God. And so, he understands how the experience of God's grace, which he will not set aside, how the experience of God's grace impacts him and ought to impact him. He will no longer live for himself but for Jesus.

And He challenges us as disciples to no longer live for ourselves but for the one who died for us, specifically because he died for us. And that outpouring of favor merits a life in exchange.