

05. Hebrews 3:1 – 4:14





so that he might be a merciful and trustworthy high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Part Two

A. A trustworthy high priest

1. Like Moses, Jesus reveals God's word 3:1-6
2. Warnings concerning faith 3:7 - 4:14

A. A trustworthy high priest 3:1

Therefore, brothers and sisters, **holy** partners in a heavenly calling, consider **Jesus**, the **apostle** and **high priest** of our confession

The author addresses his ‘brothers and sisters’ in the Christian community as ‘**holy**’ (ἅγιοι), a cultic term echoing what he said earlier about our being ‘sanctified’ (ἀγιάζων) by Jesus who shares the same Father and who calls us his ‘brothers and sisters’ (2:11-12). Jesus ‘the apostle and high priest of our confession’ has gone before us into the eternal sanctuary of the all-holy God, and he is calling us to join him there (compare Philippians 3:14).

A. A trustworthy high priest 3:1

Therefore, brothers and sisters, **holy** partners in a heavenly calling, consider **Jesus**, the **apostle** and **high priest** of our confession

In calling Jesus an ‘**apostle**’, the author keeps our attention on God, for it is God who sent Jesus on mission to us, and it is God’s word that he conveys. In calling Jesus ‘**high priest**’, he picks up the theme that he has just introduced (see 2:17), for he is going to reflect with us upon the profound significance of the communion with God that is offered us through Jesus. The author is asking us to contemplate Jesus, not just to consider certain things about him.

Hebrews 3:2

Jesus, being faithful [πιστὸς] to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house' (Numbers 12:7).

Being faithful is essential in one who is appointed to mediate God's word. πιστὸς is an adjective derived from the word for 'faith' (πίστις), and has a number of rich connotations. In relation to God, it describes Jesus as one who believes in God and who is faithful to God. Because of this, in relation to us, he is trustworthy. - and this is the aspect that our author wishes to focus on here. Jesus is trustworthy, and so we can believe in him and rely on 'the apostle and high priest' of the faith which we profess ('our confession').

Having spoken of Jesus in this way, our author goes on to make a comparison between Jesus and Moses.

Because of his unique position in the religious tradition of Israel, Moses combines in his person the mediatory roles later divided between the kings, prophets and priests. He is, for them, the mediator par excellence. His intimacy with God was proverbial: 'Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them' (Psalm 99:6).

Moses is the model for the oracle spoken through Eli, when God promised: 'I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house' (1 Samuel 2:35).

There are echoes here of the description of Moses given in the Book of Numbers (12:6-8): ‘When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with (‘faithful in’) all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.’

Jesus is greater than Moses 3:3-4

Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.)

The wonder of creation evokes praise. In verse four we are reminded how much more wonderful must be the Creator? We have already been reminded of the role of God's Son in creation.

Jesus is greater than Moses 3:5-6

Now Moses was trustworthy in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was trustworthy over God's house as a Son, and we are his house if we hold firm the accorded right and the pride that belong to hope.

God invited Moses into his presence and confided to him the Torah (see Exodus 33:12 - 34:15). It was Moses who led the people as their priest in responding to God's covenant by offering themselves to God through the symbolic offering of the blood of the sacrificial animals, and who was invited to enjoy communion with God (see Exodus 24).

Jesus is greater than Moses 3:5-6

Now Moses was trustworthy in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was trustworthy over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the accorded right and the pride that belong to hope.

Yet, in 'glory' and 'honour' (see 2:7) Jesus, the one in whom the Christian community has placed its trust, is superior even to Moses (compare 2 Corinthians 3:7-8). Our high priest is superior because Moses was faithful in God's house as a servant (see Numbers 12:7), whereas Jesus, God's Son, 'through whom God created the ages' (1:2) is faithful over God's house as a Son.

‘We are his house’ (Hebrews 3:6)

We, the Christian community, are in the privileged position of being those who form the house (the ‘temple’, the assembled Church) built by this greatest of all high priests. As we read elsewhere in the New Testament: ‘Set yourselves close to him, so that you ... may be living stones, making a spiritual house’ (1 Peter 2:5).

‘God has put all things under Christ’s feet, and has made him head over all things, for the Church which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all things, completely, everywhere’ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

‘if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope’.

The faithfulness of Jesus should encourage us to be faithful. We have been promised a place with him in the eternal sanctuary of heaven. Let us hold fast to this ‘hope’ and not be ashamed of the faith which we profess. We have been given a share in the life of the Son and therefore we have been given the right to share in his inheritance.

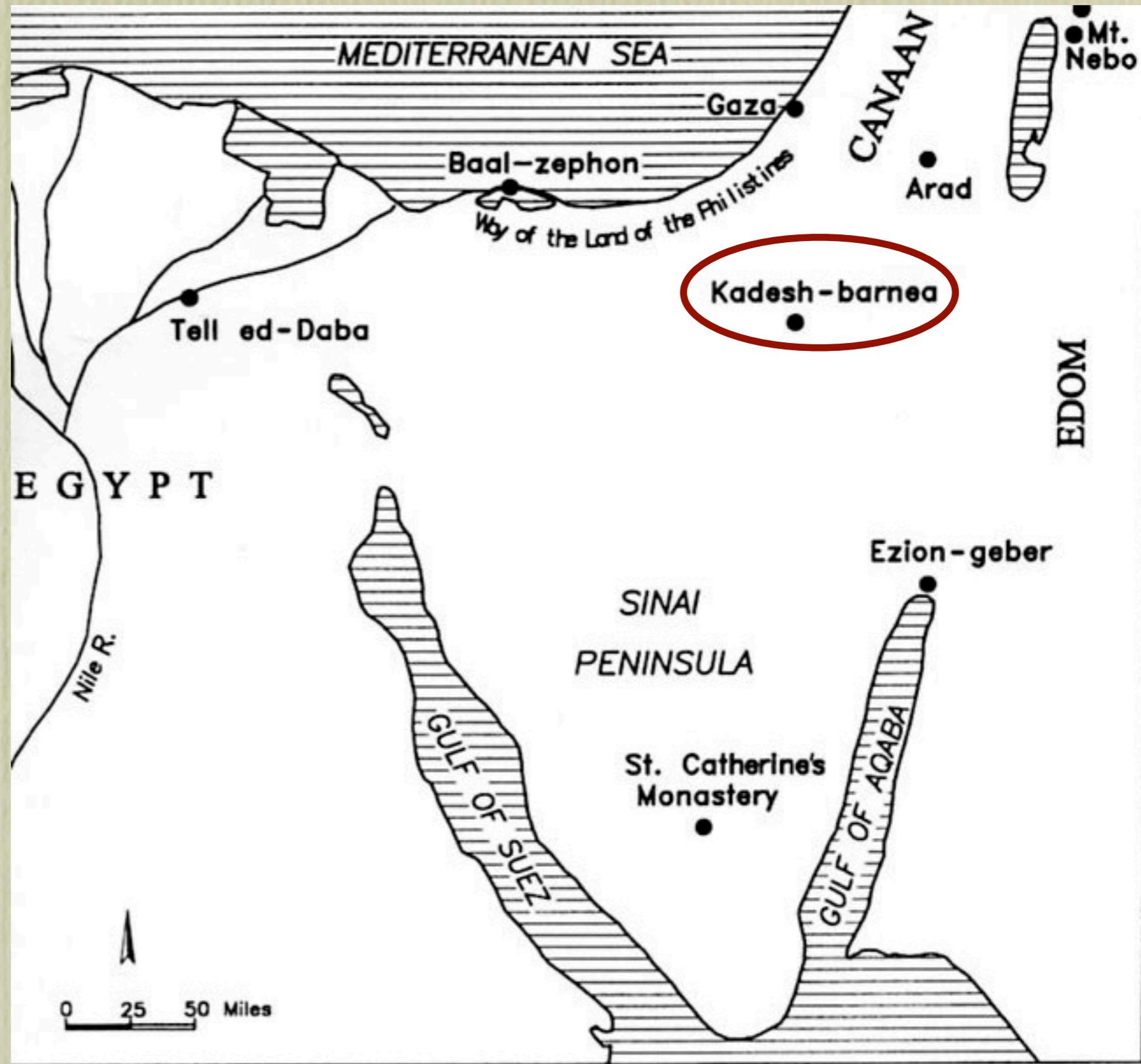
Our boast lies not in anything which we have done, but in the amazing love that we have been given and in the promise which this love holds for us. It is in this that we place our hope.

2. Warnings concerning faith 3:7 - 4:14

Hebrews 3:7-11

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion (Meribah), as on the day of testing (Massah) in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’ As in my anger I swore, ‘They will not enter my rest’ (Psalm 95:7-11).

[At Kadesh] 'None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors ... your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness ... and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you' (Numbers 14:22-23,29,43).



Hebrews 3:12-13

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The community is having to face difficulties. He has already reflected with them on the sufferings which Christ, who is now 'crowned with glory and honour' (2:9) had to endure. Christ will 'help those who are being tested' (2:18). He will do so, in a particular way, through the mutual encouragement which members of the community offer each other.

Hebrews 3:12-13

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But **exhort** one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For the first time he uses the verb 'exhort' [παρακαλεω]. It may also be translated 'encourage'. It is built up from the verb 'call' (καλεω), already used by our author when he spoke of Christ 'calling' us his brothers and sisters (2:11). This same Jesus is calling us to join him in the Promised Land. We are to be instruments of his call, calling each other to faith, hope and love, and to endurance.

Hebrews 3:14

For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold firm to the end to the principle [ἀρχήν] of what is ultimately real [ὑποστάσεως].

He has already spoken of our being ‘partners in a heavenly calling’ (3:1). He reminds us here that we will share in Jesus’ intimate love-communion with God only if we ‘hold firm to the principle [ἀρχή] of what is ultimately real [ὑποστάσις]’. The ultimately real is the living God revealed to us through his Son. Those to whom the oration is addressed once committed themselves to Christ in faith. They must remain faithful, or they, too, will not enter the rest promised them.

Hebrews 3:15-19

As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of **unbelief**.

In a series of rhetorical questions, the orator reminds us that those who rebelled were the very ones whom God had redeemed from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The implications are that we who have been redeemed from slavery to ‘the devil’ (2:12) and to ‘fear of death’ (2:15), by the ‘champion’ (2:10) who is superior to Moses, could also fail to reach our goal if we are ‘rebellious’, sinful, ‘disobedient’, and refuse to believe. ‘Unbelief’ (ἀπιστία) is a failure to follow the ‘faithful’ (πιστὸς) Jesus (3:2).

Hebrews 4:1-2

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the word they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by **faith** (πίστις) with those who listened' [Joshua and Caleb, Numbers 14:7-9, 30].

Other manuscripts read: 'because the word did not bind in with **faith those who listened**' [the word was received, but only outwardly; it was not mixed with faith, either in the sense that the people were not inspired to faith by it, or, alternatively, that the word itself was not energised by the power of faith to produce its proper fruit].

πίστις is the cognate noun for the adjective πιστός that expresses the key theme of this section (3:2,5), one of the qualities that is characteristic of our faithful and **trustworthy** high priest (2:17).

Hebrews 4:3-5 continues the application of Psalm 95

For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “As in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest’ (Psalm 95:11), though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works” (Genesis 2:2). And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest” (Psalm 95:11).

In the Genesis account the ending of each of the first six days is noted. Nothing is said about the terminating of the seventh day. Though ‘**God’s works were finished at the foundation of the world**’, the whole of human history unfolds within the seventh day.

Hebrews 4:6-8 continues the application of Psalm 95

Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day – “today” – saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’ (Psalm 95:7). For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day.

Our author plays also with the fact that the Ἰησοῦς, is **Jesus**’ name, and also the Greek form of **Joshua**, who led the people into the Promised Land.

That entrance could not have exhausted God’s promise of rest, otherwise ‘**God would not speak later about another day**’.

Hebrews 4:9-11

A Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

We live in the seventh day, so that, though some refused to believe and failed to enter into the glory of God's rest, the call to enjoy God's rest remains. What matters for each generation is our 'today', and the orator is exhorting his brothers and sisters in the Christian community to listen to the call and not to harden their hearts, but to respond in faith.

It is the Christian Joshua ('Jesus') who has entered into the fullness of the rest promised by God, and we Christians are the privileged recipients of his call to follow him there. We are on the verge of entering, 'let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest'. We must not imitate the 'disobedience' (ἀπειθεία) of our ancestors.

Hebrews 4:12-13

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked
and laid bare to his eyes. The Word for us is towards God.

In polished rhetoric, our orator draws out the implication of what he has just said. All that is said here relates to the word of God that we have heard in the promise of Genesis, in the terrible judgment of Kadesh, and in the challenge and hope held out by Psalm 95. It is true of all God's words, those spoken 'long ago to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets' (1:1), and those spoken through God's faithful servant Moses (3:5); but it is most true of the words that God has spoken and continues to speak through his Son, Jesus.

He is speaking of the living and active word of ‘God, for whom and through whom all things exist’(2:10). He is speaking of the word of him who said ‘Let there be light’ and ‘there was light’(Genesis 1:3). ‘God spoke, and it came to be; God commanded, and it stood firm’ (Psalm 33:9). ‘By the word of the Lord his works are made; and all his creatures do his will’ (Sirach 42:15).

‘My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it’ (Isaiah 55:11).

Hebrews 4:12-13

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit, **joints** from **marrow**;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked
and laid bare to his eyes. The Word for us is towards God.

God's word is sharper than any two-edged sword,
for it exposes the origin of our feelings and intentions.

It shows up in our day to day physical life ('**joints**') and in what
comes from the centre of our vital energy ('**marrow**').

Indeed, as Saint Paul says, 'the sword of the Spirit is the word of
God' (Ephesians 6:17).

We are reminded of the words of the Book of Wisdom: ‘While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command’ (Wisdom 18:14-16).

In the Book of Revelation, the risen and exalted Jesus is portrayed standing in the midst of the Christian assembly dressed as a priest: ‘From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword’ (Revelation 1:16; see 2:12; 19:15).

πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος.

The final words of verse thirteen according to the NRSV translation correspond to the warning nature of the author's words:

‘to whom we must render an account’.

However, they are capable of an alternative translation:

‘towards him [God] for us is the Word.’

God's word faces us towards God as our heart recognises the One for whom we yearn and for whom we are made. John speaks of the eternal Word as being ‘towards God’ (John 1:1). Created by God and for God, we are drawn by God's word calling us to share in the intimate communion of love enjoyed by God's Son. Let us not neglect ‘so great a salvation’ (2:3).

Hebrews 4:14

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

The author concludes his opening reflection on Christ our high priest with the image of Jesus, the Son of God, passing through the heavens to the throne of God. This image is found elsewhere in the New Testament: ‘He ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things’ (Ephesians 4:10). ‘He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God’ (1 Peter 3:22).

Our author began by speaking of Jesus as God’s ‘Son’ (1:2), and developed the implications of this special intimacy in the opening sections of his oration. He returns to it here, concluding this section by linking ‘Son’ with ‘high priest’.

‘Son of God’ was a confessional formula in the early church. Luke describes Paul immediately after his conversion as proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus is ‘the Son of God’ (Acts 9:20). In Paul we read: ‘He was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:4).

We have the following from the community of the Beloved Disciple: ‘The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin’ (1John 1:7). ‘God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God’ (1John 4:15). ‘Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1John 5:5).

Jesus, our brother, is now enjoying God’s rest in the sanctuary of heaven. Living as we are on the verge of entering with him, ‘**let us hold fast to our confession**’.