

## *Bible Study Hebrews 10-11*

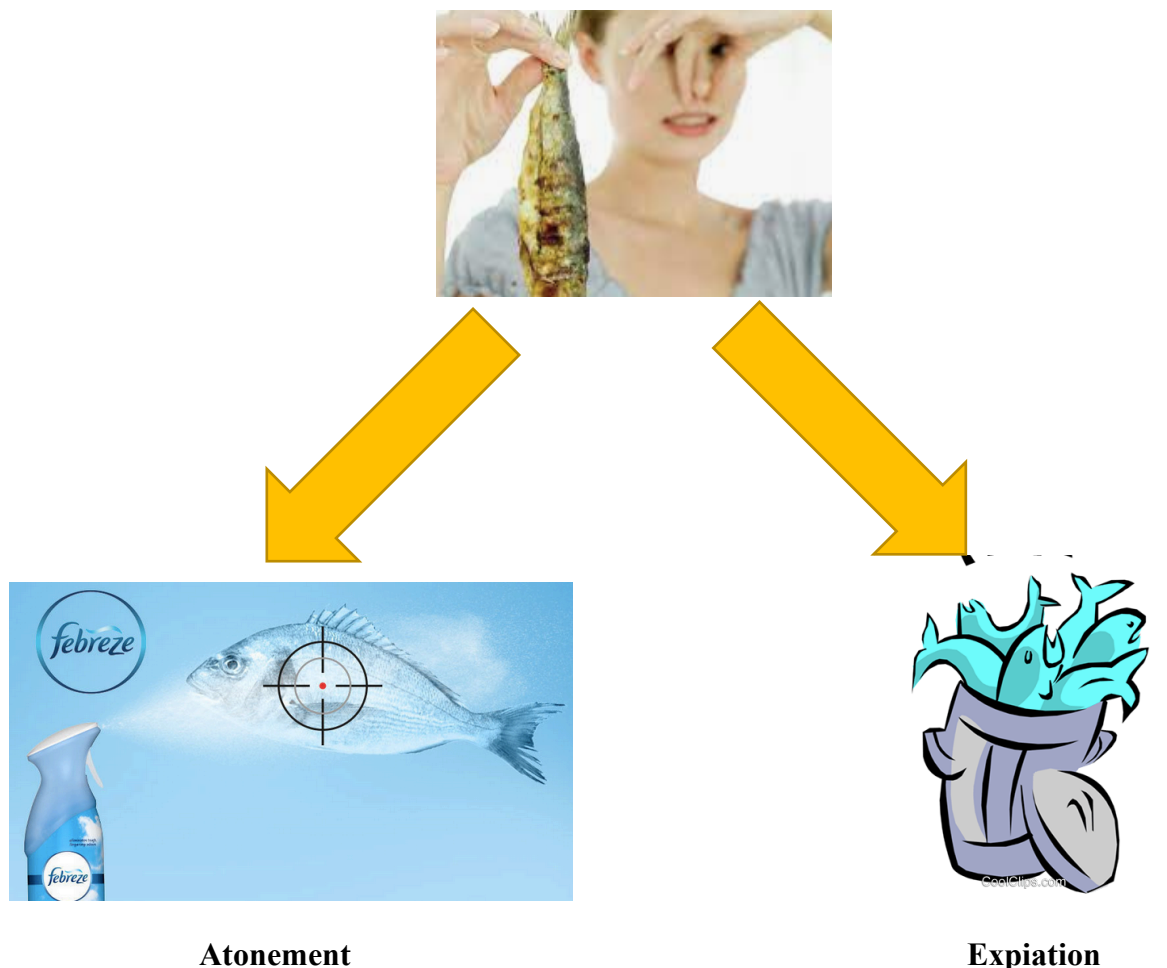
We saw in chapter 9 the theme of Israelite worship as a “copy and shadow” of heavenly worship, and a template for Orthodox worship. Chapter 10 begins with that same theme:

*“For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things...*

Here the emphasis shifts to the insufficiency and unsustainability of the Hebrew sacrificial system.

*... [It] can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.”*

In theology, there are two terms for what happens to sin when we are reconciled to God. The first is “atonement,” which carries the idea of “covering” sin. The original Hebrew word is “kipur,” which is used 140 times in the Old Testament. It is always used in terms of the Hebrew sacrifices. The second term is “expiation,” which means “to remove.” This illustrates the difference:



The Old Testament sacrificial system was based on “atonement” or “covering” of sins. Like Febreze “covering” the smell of rotten fish must constantly be replaced in order to be (barely) effective, so the sacrifices of Judaism had to be repeated constantly in order to be (barely) effective.

*For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away [i.e. expiate] sins.”*

The ancient Israelites were trapped in an endless cycle of sins that had to be constantly atoned through animal sacrifices. One of the many purposes of the Incarnation of Christ was to deliver them from this cycle. Hebrews cites one of the Psalms which prophesies the Incarnation which breaks the cycle of futility:

*“Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:  
“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,  
But a body You have prepared for Me.”*

The Psalm quoted here in Hebrews reminds us that God never fully embraced the sacrifices anyway:

*In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin  
You had no pleasure.  
Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—  
In the volume of the book it is written of Me—  
To do Your will, O God.’ ” (Psalm 40:6-8.)*

Hebrews then quotes a portion of Psalm 51, which is frequently prayed in Orthodox worship:

*“Previously saying,*

*“Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them”*

*... (which are offered according to the law)...*

*Hebrews then quotes another Psalm:*

*“...then He said, “Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.”*

These and other passages of the Old Testament also say that God considered the Israelite sacrifices were not fully satisfactory to Him. That is why He replaced them in Christ.

*“He takes away the first that He may establish the second.”*

Hebrews declares that it is not just Christ’s Incarnation that saves us. It is also the sacrifice of His Body that saves us:

*“By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”*

This is a clear reference to the Eucharist. *“Take, eat, this is my Body...”*

As we hear in the Liturgy, the Body and Blood of Christ is offered as a bloodless sacrifice.



*“Your own of Your own, we offer to You, on behalf of all, and for all!”*

*“And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.”*

The Israelite sacrifices were repeated and insufficient, but Christ’s sacrifice is once and for all, and eternally sufficient:

*“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”*

Note that Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross was once-and-for-all, and in the past tense, but our being “sanctified” is in the present tense.



For us, it is a work in progress. This is precisely how Orthodox view salvation – as a life-long process and not in a moment.

There is a Trinitarian dimension here as well.

*“But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before...”*

This precedes a quote from the book of Jeremiah, yet the text says it is actually from the Holy Spirit. This should come as no surprise since we say in the Creed, *“And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life...Who spoke through the prophets...”*

*“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” then He adds, “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.”*

The Israelites lived under a Covenant between God and Abraham. Jeremiah prophesied that this Covenant would someday be replaced by a New Covenant. Jeremiah’s prophecy was fulfilled by Christ.



*“And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations” (Genesis 17:9).*

*“And He said to them, “This is My blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for many” (Mark 14:24).*

(Genesis By Fr. John Brown 2025. All Rights Reserved. 17:9).

*“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...”*

This is a twist on what we would expect. Hebrews has repeatedly described Christ as the High Priest who enters into the Holy of Holies. But now it describes us Christians as the ones who enter into the Holy of Holies. We occupy an extraordinary position of honor.

When the Jewish High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he first offered a sacrificial animal for his own sins and then another for the sins of the people. In this verse, we are the High Priest, and Christ is the first sacrifice (*“by the blood of Jesus”*) for us the collective High Priest.

*“... by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil...”*

The *“new and living way”* is the New Covenant, which replaces the Old Covenant. *“The veil”* is the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple.

*“... that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...”*

The High Priests entered the Holy of Holies with fear and trepidation to face the living God. The Cherubim and Seraphim also approach the heavenly throne with their faces and feet covered in awe. Yet Hebrews is telling us that we can enter into the presence of the Lord with boldness, not fear. Unlike the High Priests and the Cherubim and Seraphim, we are approaching God as a child approaches their Father, with loving intimacy.

*“... having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience...”*

When the Tabernacle and Temple were consecrated, all of its major features were ritually cleansed by the sprinkling of the blood of sacrificed animals.



*“He shall slay the young bull before the Lord; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting” (Leviticus 1:5)*

*“He shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and slay it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall sprinkle the blood around on the altar” (Leviticus 3:2).*

*“Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat” (6:14-15)*

*“So Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood which was on the altar and sprinkled it on Aaron, on his garments, on his sons, and on the garments of his sons with him; and he consecrated Aaron, his garments, and his sons, and the garments of his sons with him” (8:30).*

The Bible calls our bodies the “Temple” of the Lord. *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you...?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).*

Just as the Tabernacle and Temple were cleansed by the lifeblood of an animal, our souls and bodies are washed by another liquid of life – water. Hebrews says,

*“... and our bodies washed with pure water.”*

This cleansing water of our temples is baptism.





*“... not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit...” (Titus 3:5).*

We live in a day when many Christians, including Orthodox Christians, seldom attend church. Such people often say, I can worship God just as well at home or on a golf course.

A recent Gallup poll:

POLITICS MARCH 29, 2021

## U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time

BY JEFFREY M. JONES



This decline is also evident in predominantly Orthodox countries. In Greece:

**Only 17% of Greeks report attending church weekly.** Nevertheless, almost 30% continue to pray every day, which may suggest that while faith is still strong, it is less publicly practised. People are more likely to show their faith by having pictures of religious figures and iconography in their homes.

**In Russia, according to Pew polling:**

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There also has been a modest increase in some measures of religious commitment. For example, the share of Russian adults who said they are at least “somewhat” religious rose from 11% in 1991 to 54% in 2008. And the portion of adults who said they believe in God rose from 38% to 56% over the same period.<sup>2</sup>

But for most Russians, the return to religion did not correspond with a return to church.

Across all three waves of ISSP data, no more than about one-in-ten Russians said they attend religious services at least once a month. The share of regular attenders (monthly or more often) was 2% in 1991, 9% in 1998 and 7% in 2008. This suggests that although many more Russians now freely identify with the Orthodox Church or other religious groups, they may not be much more religiously observant than they were in the recent past, at least in terms of attendance at religious services.

### Trends in Russian Religious Practices and Beliefs

% of Russian adults who said they ...

	1991	1998	2008
Attend religious services at least once a month	2%	9%	7%
Believe in God	38	46	56
Believe in life after death	33	31	32
Describe themselves as at least somewhat religious	11	45	54

Source: International Social Survey Programme

“Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church,” February 2014

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In contrast to this trend, the book of Hebrews reminds us that gathering together in church is vitally important.

*“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

The text gives us one of the major reasons why prolonged, willful absence from the Church is spiritually dangerous.

*“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*

In Orthodoxy, we believe salvation comes from deification – the gradual, continuous acquisition of the Holy Spirit in our souls. This process takes effort on our part. How can we acquire the Holy Spirit when we choose to remain from the house in which He dwells? How can we sustain our spiritual struggle through life without the nourishment of Holy Communion? How can we learn more about God when we never hear His Word preached?

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Many Christians who live apart from the Church say, “I don’t need to go to church. I have faith. That’s all I need.” The greatest danger to this is, the longer we live outside the Church, the more likely our faith will eventually turn into non-faith. Going from faith to non-faith is called apostasy. The above verses warn us that apostasy is a very serious sin, made more serious because we knew better. An apostate person is unlike those who never experienced the presence of God in our lives. If we become apostate, this verse warns us that we will be held accountable in the Day of Judgement.

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Chapter 11 of Hebrews is a classic passage in the Bible. It is a “Hall of Fame” of Old Testament saints who displayed extraordinary faith. First, the text defines faith as,

*“... the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”*

Each of the saints listed in this chapter is a hero or heroine of faith. In every case, the text begins describing each hero/heroine, “By faith \_\_\_\_.” In each case, the blank is filled in the actions that their inspired.

*“By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.”*

This refers to the Genesis story of Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve. Both offered sacrifices to God, but God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and not Cain’s. God explained to Cain that it was his behavior that led to the rejection of his sacrifice.

*“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door” (Genesis 4:7).*

Cain became jealous and murdered his brother Abel.



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Hebrews commends Abel's faithful life and virtuous deeds, which resulted in his accepted sacrifices.

*"By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, "and was not found, because God had taken him"; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God."*

We know very little about Enoch. He is briefly described in Genesis 5:

*"Enoch lived sixty-five years, and begot Methuselah. After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:21-24).*

Enoch was especially close to God, as is indicated by the phrase that he *"walked with God."* This may be a reference to the closeness between God and Adam and Eve. Before the Fall, they also *"walked with God."*

*"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"" (Genesis 3:8-9).*



The picture of "walking with God" as a description of tremendous intimacy can be found elsewhere in Scripture. It is in the Old Testament:

*"He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).*

It is also in the New Testament, where we Christians are called to "walk with God" as did Adam, Eve, and Enoch:

*"I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).*

Hebrews continues with a general precept governing God's relationship with humanity for all time:

*“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”*

In Orthodoxy, we do not believe in “universalism,” the idea that everyone will be saved. But we are, to some extent, hopeful for those who have little opportunity to hear the fulness of the Word of God. We all wonder about those who live in times and places where the knowledge of God is rare and incomplete.



God has planted in all humans the instinct to have a relationship with Him. We realize that many of His creatures have little or no access to the fulness of the Gospel, yet they still sincerely pursue Him. This verse, “... *he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*” is a reminder that God is merciful to such people.

*“By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”*



Previously in this chapter, Hebrews defined faith as “... *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” When warned Noah of future events, Noah believed God.

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In his mind, Noah “saw” the destruction of his civilization. He “hoped for” the salvation of himself and his family. He could not see the flood God warned him of, but took God’s warning as sufficient “evidence” to act in obedience. In so doing, he became the ancestor of surviving humanity.

*“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance.”*

This verse recounts the call of Abraham, the Father of faith, as recorded in Genesis 12:

*“Now the LORD had said to Abram:  
‘Get out of your country,  
From your family  
And from your father’s house,  
To a land that I will show you...’*

*So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan” (Genesis 12:1,4-5).*



*And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;*

Abram had spent the 75 years of his life in Chaldea. He had also acquired considerable wealth there. He had every reason to wish to spend the rest of his life in comfort in his homeland. But instead, God commanded Abram to pack his belongings and travel to a foreign country, where he had no house, no friends, no land, was unfamiliar with the customs and language. Despite all this Abram agreed to become a “stranger in a strange land.” Hebrews gives us a hint as to why he made this amazing move:

*“... for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”*

Abram died without seeing the city that he had foreseen. It was up to his descendants to build that city, the earthly Jerusalem. But there is another Jerusalem, which is not earthly.

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We Christians are also promised that marvelous celestial city. Christ said, *“In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2).*

The Apostle Paul wrote of it: *“... but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26).*

John was granted a vision of the heavenly city that awaits the faithful: *“And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God...” (Revelation 21:10).*

Abram *“...waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God”* and so do we.

It was not just Abram who established the family of faith:

*“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised...”*





*“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”*

God not only required Abram to be a “stranger and pilgrim,” He also required the Hebrew people to wander in the desert before they arrived in the Promised Land. Like Abram and the Israelites of old, we are also expected to be strangers and pilgrims in this world.

The Apostle Peter began his first Epistle to the Church:

*“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,  
To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...”*

The Apostle James wrote similarly:

*“James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad:  
Greetings.”*

The Apostles described our earthly bodies as tents:



*“For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (2 Corinthians 5:1)*

*“Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me” (2 Peter 13-14).*

This comparison is instructive. Tents are temporary. They are designed to be taken down and moved in a moment’s notice. This world as our permanent home, and we should strive not to think of it as such. We should not sink our roots too deeply into it because we will someday be called to leave it. Our permanent home awaits us in heaven, and far surpasses this temporal world.

Hebrews continues its focus on Abraham, and recalls his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. The story of God calling Abraham to sacrifice his only son is recorded in Genesis 22, where God stopped Abraham at the last second. This verse from Hebrews says the reason Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac:

*“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.”*

This detail was not included in the Genesis account. Abraham believed that if he sacrificed his son, God would raise him from the dead. Abraham believed in the resurrection long before it was revealed.

The chapter continues the chronological list of faithful ancestors of the Jews and Christians:

*“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.*

*By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.*

*By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.”*

The text pays special attention to Moses:

*By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s command.*

*By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.”*

Note that by siding with his fellow Hebrews, and risking their hardships, it says Moses was also accepting “the reproach of Christ,” who came a millennium later.

*“By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”*

Somehow, Moses rejection of the Pharaoh he could see was mysteriously connected to the Christ he could not yet see.

*“By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned.*

*By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days. By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.”*

Although she was a Canaanite prostitute, Rahab’s help to the Israelite spies saved her life. She was so embraced by the Israelites that she became an ancestor of Christ. She is mentioned in our Lord’s genealogy:

*“Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse...” (Matthew 1:5).*

*“And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.*

*Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.*

The Jews had a rich legacy of martyrs and confessors. Some of these are recorded in the Deuterocanonical books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are in the Orthodox and Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant Bible. The fact that Hebrews summarizes material in the books of Maccabees adds credibility for their inclusion in Scripture.

Also, this list of martyrs and confessors in Hebrews reads very much like the “Lives of the Saints.” The Church pays great attention to the sufferings of our historical saints, and this attention grows directly from a similar attention paid to Jewish saints as summarized in Hebrews.

*“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us...”*

A major part of Christianity is faith in a blessed afterlife. We pray in the prayer of the Hours:

*“You who at every season and every hour, in Heaven and on earth are worshipped and glorified, O Christ God; long-suffering, merciful and compassionate; Who love the just and show mercy upon the sinner; Who calls all to salvation through the promise of blessings to come...”*

This chapter concludes with a powerful statement. After listing so many of the great saints of the Old Testament, it says of them,

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*“...that they should not be made perfect apart from us.”*

As before, the Greek word translated in the English “made perfect” is a variation of “telos,” which conveys the idea of “completion.” A more accurate translation of this verse would be, *“...that they should not be made complete apart from us.”* In the Orthodox Church we are accustomed to thinking of the saints having a role in our salvation. We routinely pray, *“Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and save us.”* We ask the holy saints to assist us where we are lacking by their intercessions. But this verse from Hebrews turns the equation around. It says that the holy saints are not complete without us! This reminds us that salvation is ultimately corporate. The completion of the salvation of the common faithful of every age is connected to the salvation of the saints of every age.