[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Have you ever begun watching a movie halfway through (for some reason)? Or seen – or read! – a sequel when you hadn’t seen the first installment? How was it? How did it feel?

[Discussion.]

Well, the way in which the Lectionary divides Hebrews perplexes me: To begin this morning’s section with the word ‘indeed’ only begs the question – the question of, “What point has our author – whether Luke or Priscilla1 – been making, which we’ve not seen, that (s)he is now wishing to emphasize; to elaborate?”

After all, this is the meaning of the term, is it not?

Thus, according to the online dictionary, Merriam-Webster: ‘indeed…[is] used to stress the truth of a statement.’

So, what was it?!

(What piece of this puzzle are we missing?)

And the answer is to be found in the immediately preceding sentence, which is verse eleven. It goes like this: ‘Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.’

‘[T]hat rest’ is the eternal rest to be experienced by those who will go on to live with Jesus in the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’[12:22] following the resurrection of the dead at that time our author simply calls – in a later chapter, ‘[T]he Day’: [10:25].

And notice that our author, exactly like James – as we (recently) discovered,3 appears to understand ‘salvation as a work in progress’;4 this ‘is clear enough’.5

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1 See last week’s notes: http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Bible-Study-20181007-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Hebrews-Wk-1-1v1-4_BTR.pdf
2 See: http://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/indeed
5 Ibid.
– something that involves ‘human responsibility’, or ‘effort’, for “holding fast” – to borrow the expression from verse 14 – to the confession of faith that has initiated the “process.” (And we will see evidence that this was his – or her(!) – opinion throughout the letter.)

But the author of Hebrews doesn’t mention this to make their recipients nervous, anxious. No. The key word here, I think, is ‘boldness’ – verse 16. The idea is to inspire – to inspire ‘obedience and the resolute setting aside of sin…a persistent attitude which is triumphant over the various temptations [we face]’ that ‘rests’ – there’s that word again – ‘on the certainties that Jesus has entered [H]eaven as our forerunner and that God will fulfil His promises [of the Cross] to us’ [because of the unwavering love that He has for His Son].

The strategy, then, isn’t to frighten Christians into remaining faithful children of their Heavenly Father, but one that ‘stimulates gratitude and loyalty’. And it is to this end that the rest of the saved in the Kingdom-to-Come is mentioned ten times in rapid succession: [3:11,18; 4:1,3,5,8,9,10,11].

This was a terribly important pastoral theme for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the very nature of the fallen life – the life that we lead – life apart from God, the life lived in spite of His directives – is hard work: Genesis 3, verse 17-19 – ‘And to the man [in Eden] He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and [only by the sweat of your face] shall you eat bread until you [die].”’

Throughout the Old Testament, therefore, allusions to which ‘abound’ in Hebrews, we find God incentivising His people with offers of partially – graciously – reversing this fact: Canaan, for example, the “Holy Land,” was, essentially, a gift of ‘easily defensible and lightly inhabited hill country’ to a slave-nation that they might have a “safe” place to ‘rest from [the] enemies’ who were exploiting them. (See Deuteronomy 12 [v.10] and 25 [v.19].) The commandment to observe a day of rest in Exodus also served as a reminder of what humanity had enjoyed in the Garden and as such was understood not as a nuisance but as a foretaste of what is in store for those who persevere in Christ’s “narrow way”: ‘A Sabbath day on earth is [H]eaven’s preseason. And [H]eaven is an eternal Sabbath’. It was ‘an eschatological day on which the

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future bursts into the present.’12 And these were “down payments”13 pointing to the fact that God has ‘a single, eternal plan encompassing the end, beginning and all the points of history in between.’14

Secondly, because, apart for the super-rich – the Senatorial and Equestrian classes of Rome, everyday existence was tough in the late Iron Age: most people were involved with some form of ‘heavy physical work’15 – their lives were much more exacting and arduous than ours, revolving as they did, almost exclusively, around agriculture and resource extraction.16 And this was true of the empire of the Caesars, even though, as I’ve suggested before – (again) when we were discussing James,17 that, in many pronounced ways, she was an oasis of calm prosperity in the ancient world. As the historian Frances Haverfield has said: ‘the Roman Empire was the civilized world; the safety of Rome was the safety of all civilization.’18 Consequently, we find, within her borders, ‘per capita incomes’ were ‘at the upper end of what could be achieved in pre-industrial economies’,19 and ‘normal wages were well above subsistence.’20 But this wasn’t modern America: On average, the Christian men and women that (first) received and read Hebrews, according to the archaeological record (for the period and region), died, exhausted, in their thirties with ‘soft and spongy’ skeletons from anemia; their hands blistered and calloused, joints exceedingly sore, and with lungs full of choking wood-smoke.21

Thirdly, the eternal rest to be enjoyed by the righteous was an important pastoral theme because of who, in particular, were likely the intended audience for Hebrews: new converts facing unpleasant maltreatment in the capital city – this is ‘the current consensus’.22 The most telling evidence that Rome was the setting for this letter is in chapter thirteen – the final chapter – where, signing off, the author says: ‘Those

14 Ibid., 143.
20 Ibid., 602.
from Italy send you greetings.\[v.24\] But there was probably more than one congregation in that ‘vast metropolis of more than a million inhabitants’\[23\] – there were at least eleven synagogues after all,\[24\] and ‘[t]he most favoured suggestion is that [the addressees] formed a house group which had broken away from the main church’,\[25\] possibly in an effort to preserve themselves as an exclusively ethnically Jewish group of Christians – hence the name – in the face of an avalanche of Gentile conversion, which threatened, in their minds, to “swamp” them.\[26\]

From its many references to the Temple (in Jerusalem) and the sacrificial system centred on it,\[e.g. 7:27; 8:3; 9:9\] we can be certain that Hebrews was written before those things were destroyed by the soldiers of Titus in A. D. 70.\[27\] And a passing remark to ‘[r]emember your leaders…[and] their way of life’ towards the end of the letter implies that it was aimed at a group which was not brand new in these parts either.\[28\] And I mention these details because, taken together, they indicate that the period in which it was composed was quite a narrow one, in fact; one of great violence for believers under the reign of the infamous, incestuous psychotic, Nero Augustus [54-68].\[29\] Much before this date, the authorities struggled – or simply weren’t inclined to – distinguish between Judaism, which they tolerated and ignored, and its “explosive” offshoot.\[30\] But on the night of the ‘19\[th\] of July 64, a conflagration broke out in Rome which blazed for nine days and destroyed a quarter of the city. People at the time and historians later blamed emperor Nero for deliberately starting the fire to clear

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26 See, for example: Milligan, George (December, 1901), The Roman Destination of the Epistle to the Hebrews’, *The Expositor*, Volume 4, No. 6, pp. 437-448, 437.
28 The first Christians, unknown pilgrims, probably, returning from Jerusalem (where they had encountered the Apostles), arrived in Rome in the late 40s A. D. See: https://bible.org/article/origins-church-rome
29 Goodspeed, Edgar Johnson (1908), *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New York, N. Y.: The MacMillan Company, 19-20. ‘Nero’, says one biographer, ‘was not more mad than most.’ He was only prone to occasional ‘horrible viciousness’. ‘But how far that vice is to be laid at the door of his inherited nature, or his upbringing by Agrippina [his murderous mother – with whom he had sexual relations] and Seneca [his hypocritical, double-dealing tutor*], or his possession, while still a youth, of absolute power, or an inherent depravity, we cannot judge, at least accurately enough to apportion their right proportion of the blame to each of the four causes.’ (Henderson, Bernard W. (1903), *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, London: Methuen & Co., 415.) (*See: Beard, Mary (9th of October, 2014), ‘How Stoical Was Seneca?’, *The New York Review of Books*, available at https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/10/09/how-stoical-was-seneca/ (accessed October 12, 2018).
the center of the city for his own building projects...[and chose] the Christians as a scapegoat...rumors [of cannibalism – a (grotesque) misunderstanding of the Eucharist] were circulated against them...[and many] were crucified.31 One historian puts it this way: ‘The persecution that followed was bloody and brutal, with refinements of savagery that eventually aroused the pity of even the hardened Roman mob.’32

Fortunately, ‘[h]e himself rapidly lost interest in the proceedings, and moved on to his grandiose plans for a vast new imperial palace, the Golden House’ – an immense venue to host his orgies and the other depravities that he found so amusing.33 But the events of those days were burdensome to the Church there, and our author recalls them as a ‘hard struggle with sufferings...being publicly exposed to abuse...prison...[and] the plundering of your possessions’: [10:32-34]. To be reassured, then, that, in spite of such painful experiences – which were, with a lesser degree of intensity (as the pretext receded in time), ongoing – those who ‘confessed’ Christ had a blissful ‘rest’ ahead of them was good news indeed. Especially if He was one who could ‘sympathize’ with their plight, as we see at the end of today’s section, having been precisely ‘tested as [they had]’[v.15] – at the point of a legionary’s pilum [spear] and by his cat-o-nine.

Of course, to remind people that their lot will be better in the life beyond has been scornfully mocked by those outside of our religion: Karl Marx – the principle philosopher behind Communism – called Christianity ‘the opium of the masses’,34 and we see that in this passage the author of Hebrews is intending to have something of this effect – not because he is, politically, a quietist. Or trying to encourage others to be so. This is what Marx thought it was created – and exploited – by elites to do – to subdue the “proletariat” by placating them with ‘[an] illusory happiness’ so that they would willingly ‘wear the chain[s]’ placed around them by their “masters.” But Hebrews is (without a doubt) trying to shift our perspective in such a way as to alleviate the weight of life’s problems by exposing their transitory quality.

Does that help?

31 Ibid., 50-52 & 123.
32 Gray-Fow, Michael J. G. (September 1998), ‘Why the Christians? Nero and the Great Fire’, Latomus, Volume 57, No. 3, pp. 595-616, 595. (Why, if Nero was the prime suspect, did others – the public at large – so willingly collaborate with the conspiracy against the Christians? This is an interesting question. William Dunstan (Ancient Rome (2011), Lanham, M. D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 293) says: ‘To most Romans, Christian repudiation of the Roman gods constituted blasphemy and bordered on treason.’ (My emphasis.) How so? Edward Gibbon (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in Six Volumes: Volume II (1993), London: Random House, 4) explains: ‘[T]he religious concord of the [classical world was principally supported by the implicit assent and reverence which the nations of antiquity expressed for [each other’s] respective traditions and ceremonies. It might therefore be expected that they would unite with indignation against any sect or people which should separate itself from th[is] communion.’)
33 Ibid., 616.
Do your bereavements, regrets and troubles feel lighter? – knowing that, at their greatest extent, they are only temporary whereas God intends you to endure forever.

[Discussion.]