Hebrews is, to use Paul’s words, “strong meat” (Hebrews 5:14). Paul wants to preach strong meat, but he addresses members who will not digest it (see Hebrews 5:12). Nevertheless, he broaches doctrines that deal with the upper reaches of spiritual experience and Melchizedek Priesthood temple ordinances. My purpose will be to identify several passages that have relevance to temple ordinances. Paul’s letter might be divided into two main ideas: the promise of the temple and the price exacted to obtain the promise. At several points I will add the Prophet Joseph Smith’s commentary, without which much of the temple significance of the apostle’s remarks in Hebrews would elude us.

The Promise

Paul urges the Hebrews, “Let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance ... and of faith” (Hebrews 6:1–2; italics added). They had tarried too long in the foothills of spiritual experience. Having “tasted of the heavenly gift, ... the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (Hebrews 6:4–6), they could no longer delay resuming the climb lest they lose the promise. Paul warns, “Be not slothful, but followers of them
who through faith and patience inherit [or, are inheriting] the promises” (Hebrews 6:12).

The promise that Paul refers to repeatedly is that same promise explained in Doctrine and Covenants 88:68–69: “Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. Remember the great and last promise which I have made unto you” (italics added). Paul uses several different terms in Hebrews for the experiences associated with this promise: for example, obtaining a good report (11:39), entering into the Lord’s rest (4:3, 10), going on to perfection (6:1), entering into the holiest (10:19), being made a high priest forever (7:17), knowing the Lord (8:11; D&C 84:98), pleasing God (Hebrews 11:5), obtaining a witness of being righteous (11:4), and having the law written in the heart (8:10; 10:16; Jeremiah 31:31–34). He speaks of boldly pursuing the fulfillment of the promise: Grasp, he says, the hope that is set before you, which enters behind the veil, where Jesus, as a forerunner, has already entered (see Hebrews 6:18–20, NIV).

Paul compares these Israelites to their ancestors of twelve hundred years earlier. He refers to the early Israelites’ rejection of God’s invitation to enter into his rest as the “provocation”; that is, Israel provoked God by refusing to enter his presence. Paul quotes from Psalm 95:8–11: “Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said . . . they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest” (Hebrews 3:8–11; italics added).

In this Exodus account to which Paul alludes, the chil-
Children of Israel gazed at the quaking, smoking, fiery mount and refused to exercise the faith to go up. The upper reaches of the mount are, to be sure, not for the faint-hearted. The frightened Israelites foolishly told Moses to go on their behalf (see Exodus 20:18-21). The Lord, referring to the Melchizedek Priesthood as the key to God’s presence, explains in modern revelation what it was that Israel rejected: “For without this [priesthood] no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord . . . swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also” (D&C 84:22-26; italics added).

We can’t escape the insight here that it was unnecessary for the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Had they exercised faith in Jehovah, who is mighty to deliver, they might have abbreviated those trials and entered speedily into the promised land and into a Zion, even a translated society like Enoch’s or Melchizedek’s (see D&C 105:2-6). But, Paul laments, the early Israelites refused to enter because of unbelief (see Hebrews 3:19). He says, “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise . . . of entering into his rest, any of you should . . . come short of . . . For we which have believed do enter into rest” (Hebrews 4:1, 3; italics added). Among Paul’s fellows were those who were even then entering into the Lord’s rest.

The Joseph Smith Translation of Exodus 34 increases our vocabulary for what it was that Israel rejected: “I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my
holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst” (JST Exodus 34:1–2; italics added). The Prophet Joseph remarked on Israel’s rejection using yet another term for the loss, that is, the term last law:

God cursed the children of Israel because they would not receive the last law from Moses. When God offers a blessing or knowledge to a man, and he refuses to receive it, he will be damned. The Israelites prayed that God would speak to Moses and not to them; in consequence of which he cursed them with a carnal law. . . . [But] the law revealed to Moses in Horeb never was revealed to the children of Israel as a nation.3

When God gives the Saints the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is the power and authority to ascend into the presence of God through temple ordinances, they must come or be damned.

The Aaronic Priesthood retained the keys to the ministry of angels but not to the presence of God (see D&C 84:26). Hebrews opens with a discussion of Christ’s superiority over ministering angels. Paul’s point is that even though Israel chose a law of intermediaries, that is, the ministering of angels, they must not value angels over the direct presence of God. They had chosen the keys to an anteroom but rejected those to the throne room itself.

The history of Israel is punctuated by their preference for intermediaries over God himself. One scholar notes, “Once the immediacy of early prophecy comes to an end, the angels serve to mediate the secrets of nature, the heavenly world and the last age.”4 Josephus reports that the Essenes had a preoccupation with the secret names of angels,5 and the fascination of the mystical kabbalistic Jews with angelic hierarchies is well known. The early Christian
interposition of saints between God and man is another form of substitution of intermediaries for God himself.

One may indeed receive keys to discern and control angelic visitations (see D&C 129). Joseph Smith taught that there were keys of the kingdom, "certain signs and words by which false spirits and personages may be detected from true, which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed. . . . There are signs . . . the Elders must know . . . to be endowed with the power, to finish their work and prevent imposition." But the applicant for exaltation must exceed the right to the ministry of angels in order to regain the presence of God. The Lord said to the Church in this dispensation with respect to angels assisting in the redemption of Zion: "Let not your hearts faint, for I say not unto you as I said unto your fathers: Mine angel shall go up before you, but not my presence [Exodus 33:2–3]. But I say unto you: Mine angels shall go up before you, and also my presence" (D&C 103:19–20; italics added).

In attempting to persuade the Hebrew members of the superiority of the Melchizedek law over the Aaronic, Paul implies that an order of holy beings prevails in the eternal worlds that the Saints are called to enter. Christ belongs to this order as did Melchizedek. Paul deals in three places with Melchizedek: chapters 5, 7, and, without naming him, in chapter 11. Though man is created a little lower than the angels here on earth, yet his destiny is to put all in subjection under him, as Christ did, who brings "many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:7–10). "Salvation is nothing more or less than to triumph over all our enemies and put them under our feet and when we have power to put all enemies under our feet in this world and a knowledge to triumph over all evil spirits in the world to come, then we are saved, as in the case of Jesus." Alma teaches that "many, exceedingly
great many," have entered into this holy order, Melchizedek being prototypical of them (see Alma 13:12, 17). Paul maintains that the Levitical law never could have brought its adherents into the Holy of Holies (e.g., Hebrews 7:11). Under the Levitical law only the high priest entered there, and that once a year. Therefore, so long as the Levitical or Mosaic law still stood, the way into the sanctuary necessarily remained veiled (see Hebrews 9:8). Christ rent the veil to the Holy of Holies to make entrance behind the veil possible, not for just one high priest, but for a whole kingdom of high priests (see Hebrews 10:20; Exodus 19:6).

Paul alludes to three levels of priesthood power. The Levitical, which could never make anyone perfect; Abraham's patriarchal power, which embraces eternal marriage; and Melchizedek's, which was a power greater still than Abraham's, "even power of an endless life, of which [order] was our Lord Jesus Christ, which [order] also Abraham [later] obtained by the offering of his son Isaac. [Abraham's] power [was not that] of a prophet nor apostle nor patriarch only, but of king and priest to God, to open the windows of Heaven and pour out the peace and law of endless life to man, and no man can attain to the joint heirship with Jesus Christ without being administered to by one having the same power and authority of Melchizedek" (see JST Genesis 14:40; also Hebrews 7:6, 17). "If a man gets the fulness of God he has to get it in the same way that Jesus Christ obtained it and that was by keeping all the ordinances of the house of the Lord." Thus, through obedience to Melchizedek Priesthood temple ordinances, fallen man and woman may develop into the order of Melchizedek, Abraham, and Christ.

But Paul perceives that his flock could not digest the full truth about Melchizedek's priesthood power (see Hebrews
5:11), so he alludes obliquely to him in Hebrews 11:33–34. That the allusion is to Melchizedek is clear from the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 14, which describes Melchizedek in nearly identical wording, saying that Melchizedek had the priesthood power of translation by which many of the citizens of his city obtained translation. Paul mentioned earlier in this chapter (see Hebrews 11:8–10) that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob also sought an inheritance in this heavenly city of translated beings; that is, they sought to be translated and to join the city of Enoch, as had those who became Saints “during the nearly 700 years from the translation of Enoch to the flood of Noah.”

The Price

Paul refers repeatedly to suffering and sacrifice. It is at this point that we sense why the Saints of any day would tremble at ascending the holy mount. Temple covenants of sacrifice are quite comprehensive. Paul defines high priest as one who makes sacrifices for others (see Hebrews 5:1), referring to the function of the high priest in the Mosaic temple, but perhaps more broadly to all high priests. After all, the veil that Christ, the great high priest, rent for us was the veil of his own flesh, not only opening the way for us into the holiest, but showing how comprehensive is the sacrifice required to follow him and obtain his order (see Hebrews 10:19–20).

We have the ambiguous passage in Hebrews 5:7–9 that seems to refer at the same time both to Christ and Melchizedek: “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.” Sometimes this passage is misinterpreted to mean that Christ or Melchizedek had to suffer the consequences of not obeying before they learned to obey. Rather, the sense is that they were
willing to submit to suffering anything necessary in order to come up to the full measure of obedience to God, and by so sacrificing, achieved perfection. Spencer Kimball says similarly: "To each person is given a pattern—obedience through suffering, and perfection through obedience."\(^{12}\)

It is not just any sacrifice or suffering that suffices, but that which is necessary to fulfill what God requires (see 2 Nephi 31:9; 1 Samuel 15:22, obedience is "better than sacrifice"). Nevertheless, the sufferings and sacrifices of the Saints become, as Peter says, more precious than fine gold (see 1 Peter 1:7, 4:13). John Taylor wrote that Joseph Smith spoke in a similar vein to the twelve apostles: "You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary that you be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God. . . . God will feel after you and he will take hold of you, and wrench your heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of God"\(^{13}\) (see D&C 97:8).

How can one press forward in the midst of sacrificing and suffering? The Prophet Joseph answers in the Lectures on Faith:

They are enabled by faith to lay hold on the promises which are set before them, and wade through all the tribulations and afflictions to which they are subjected by reason of the persecution from those who know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . believing that the mercy of God will be poured out upon them in the midst of their afflictions, and that he will compassionate them in their sufferings, and that the mercy of God will lay hold of them and secure them in the arms of his love.\(^{14}\)

Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation. . . . It was through this sacrifice [of all earthly
things], and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life; and it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God. When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has for the truth's sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice because he seeks to do his will, he does know, most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not, nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.  

Referring to Paul's well-known quote about our fathers not being able to be perfect without us, nor we without them, I quote the Joseph Smith Translation rewording: “God having provided [Greek provided beforehand] some better things for them through their sufferings, for without sufferings they could not be made perfect” (JST Hebrews 11:40; italics added). The Prophet Joseph stated this idea in another place: “Men have to suffer that they may come upon Mount Zion and be exalted above the heavens.”

The Prophet Joseph used this same verse as a proof text for temple work for the dead. Scripture is susceptible of multiple interpretations, and, in this case, the ideas of suffering, of sacrifice, and of sealing are part of the larger picture of sanctification. In fact, the sacrifice that the sons of Levi will offer up is identified with the book of remembrance of the dead in Doctrine and Covenants 128:24, the section in which the prophet teaches the welding link necessary with ancestors and makes reference to Hebrews 11:40.

This much is clear then: life is not granted to us to please us or to satisfy our telestial ideas of what life should be, but rather it is to develop and refine us. In addition, the acquiring
of godly light and knowledge requires an all-encompassing sacrifice, made perhaps over time, similar in our own limited sphere to the Savior's sacrifice in his greater sphere. As he drank the cup his Father gave him, so the Saints drink what the Lord Jesus gives them. The Savior's cup was not to be ministered to but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many (see Matthew 20:28).

Still on the subject of suffering, Paul remarks, "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance [from trials and sufferings]; that they might obtain a better resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35). The Prophet Joseph defines deliverance as translation and identifies the place of habitation of those translated as "that of the terrestrial order and a place prepared for such characters; . . . [these who were translated] he held in reserve to be ministering angels unto many planets, and who as yet have not entered into so great a fulness as those who are resurrected from the dead."17

The Prophet Joseph explains, however, that some who were worthy to receive deliverance from their trials and sufferings by translation chose rather to prolong the labors of their ministries, understanding the refining power of sacrifice, so as to obtain the highest possible resurrection. But those who became translated beings or angels minister to the heirs of salvation (see Hebrews 1:14). Heirs of salvation are those who have been called and elected, but who still dwell in the telestial world (see D&C 7:6–7; 76:88; 77:11).

At the end of Hebrews Paul returns to the mighty promises associated with the ascent of the holy mount: He says the mount that Israel in his day confronts is not physical or earthly like the one their fathers refused to ascend; rather, the Saints' privileges are to "come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,
to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:22–24). Then soberly, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh” (Hebrews 12:25; italics added). Joseph said in further commentary on this passage:

[The Hebrew church] came unto the spirits of just men made perfect, . . . to angels, . . . to God, and to Jesus Christ . . . ; but what they learned, has not been, and could not have been written. What object was gained by this communication with the spirits of the just, etc.? It was the established order of the kingdom of God—the keys of power and knowledge were with them [the angels] to communicate to the Saints—What did they learn by coming to the spirits of just men made perfect? Is it written? No! [It can’t be written.] The spirits of just men are made ministering servants to those who are sealed unto life eternal and it is through them that the sealing power comes down.18

The urge to know the mysteries of godliness is no idle curiosity; rather, it is a divine drive to acquire that level of godly power modeled by Christ and others of his holy order. It is in addition the means of increasing one’s power to bring others to Christ: “And if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous . . . that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth” (D&C 6:11; see also Alma 26:22).

The insight lying interlinearly in Hebrews and in the Prophet Joseph’s remarks suggests that men and women may do what Christ did by learning and applying eternal law, entering by conscious knowledge and power into their exaltation. This life, Paul seems to say, as does Amulek, is the time for men to prepare to meet God (see Alma 34:32). We may have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood
This achievement requires a faith that seems to border on audacity. But he reassures his readers that, as the Savior is so abundantly able to succor his people, we may “therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

The Prophet Joseph wrote an impassioned letter to his uncle about these stirring possibilities, quoting Hebrews 6:

[Paul said,] “We have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast and which entereth into that within the veil” [Hebrews 6:18-19]. Yet [Paul] was careful to press upon them the necessity of continuing on until they . . . might have the assurance of their salvation confirmed to them by an oath from the mouth of him who could not lie. For that seemed to be the example anciently, and Paul holds it out to his brethren as an object attainable in his day. And why not? . . . If the Saints in the days of the apostles were privileged to take the [earlier] Saints for example and lay hold of the same promises . . . [that is] that they were sealed there . . . will not the same faithfulness, the same purity of heart, and the same faith bring the same assurance of eternal life—and that in the same manner—to the children of men now in this age of the world? . . . And have I not an equal privilege with the ancient saints? And will not the Lord hear my prayers, and listen to my cries, as soon as he ever did to theirs if I come to him in the manner they did?”

Many Saints in the Church hunger and thirst after greater righteousness and spiritual experience, just as our father Abraham did (see Abraham 1:2). The hunger is our birthright. Nevertheless, it is common to discourage such people out of fear that they will go off the track somehow in their pursuit, and of course that danger continuously presents itself. Old Scratch, as one of my friends calls the adversary, is always lurking behind a tree.
But the opposite risk is that members will straggle in the foothills of spiritual experience as Israel has repeatedly done. So Paul says, "Exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25); "for ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Hebrews 10:36–37). Paul's letter is a powerful call to pay the price, to obtain the promise in spite of earth or hell, and to come all the way up the holy mount to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. The basic premise in this paper is that the apostle Paul is the author of Hebrews, a fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith acknowledged on several occasions.
2. Joseph Smith says that the law written in the heart will be fulfilled when the Saints' callings and elections are made sure and when they receive the Second Comforter (see WJS, 19, n. 9).
3. WJS, 244; italics added.
5. Ibid.
6. WJS, 20–21.
7. Ibid., 200.
9. WJS, 245.
10. Ibid., 213.
13. As quoted by John Taylor, JD, 24:197.
15. Ibid., 6:7.
16. WJS, 244, 247.
17. Ibid., 41–42.