

Final Words

Hebrews 13

You may remember that the Jewish Christians who made up the original audience of this epistle originally embraced the Gospel and the new covenant it brings with great enthusiasm. Some even willingly suffered persecution and imprisonment for the sake of Christ (10:32–34). However, under continuing persecution this audience began wavering in their faith. A few began to consider abandoning Christ and going back to the old covenant system.

In order to prevent this from happening, the author of the epistle wrote to exhort his audience to remain faithful to the new covenant. After all, since Jesus is so much greater than either the angels or Moses (1:1–3:6), those who leave Him will be in a worse position than that faithless first generation of Israel that was cut off from the Promised Land (3:7–4:13). Not that those with true faith can lose salvation. Rather, this warning had to be cast in general terms because the author could not have been sure of the reality of anyone's faith, although he did know that true believers always

persevere (4:14–6:12).

One way that God bolstered their perseverance was by reminding them of the superiority of the new covenant inaugurated by Christ's sacrifice (6:13–10:18) so that they would be motivated to cling to Jesus. Similarly, He moves us to place our faith in this Jesus, the promise for which the old covenant saints waited (10:19–11:40). These saints cheer us on, bearing witness to our need to strengthen ourselves to finish the race of faith by obeying God's commands (12:1–29).

For twelve chapters, the author of Hebrews has encouraged his readers to leave the Temple and all its associated systems for the new community of believers in Jesus. To help them best thrive, he offers shares multiple practical steps to living well in the community he has encouraged them to join and remain as vital members.

It is his final encouragement and it arrives in a barrage of short, pithy commands.

1-2 - Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Arriving in a new community is like the first day of a new school. It may be initially easier to

‘go it alone’ but that is not better in the long run of the race Christians run (Hb 12:1-2).

Verse 2 is undoubtedly a reference to Genesis 18 when Abraham and Sarah entertained angels near the oaks of Mamre. As a result of Abraham’s hospitality, he welcomed the messengers who told him about Isaac’s miraculous birth.

The idea is that such wonderful news and help is also available to us in fellowship with other believers.

3 - Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

Julius Caesar had formulated a policy of allowing Jews to follow their traditional religious practices, a policy which was followed, and extended, by Augustus. This gave Judaism the status of a *religio licita* (permitted religion) throughout the Empire. Roman authorities respected tradition in religion and the Jews were following the beliefs and practices of their ancestors.

But as Christianity became more distinct from Judaism and Christians began to leave the Temple and synagogue, it also left the protection

temple and synagogue, it also felt the protection that Judaism offered it as an authorized religion in the Roman Empire. Jews began to persecute Christians and encouraged the Roman government to do likewise. The end result was loss, imprisonment and even death.

These readers have already endured that kind of persecution

10:34 - For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one

4 - Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Some have speculated that either asceticism or a sexual libertinism had been influencing the congregation. Either choice is a possibility since the early church faced both issues. For example, 1 Corinthians was written partly to combat the asceticism and sexual immorality that was rampant in the Corinthian church.

Marriage is important because it is a reflection of Jesus and the church. It reflects Jesus's holiness and his love.

5-6- *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* ⁶ *So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”*

Many theologians have noted that one of these forbidden sins is actually the root of many evils. This forbidden sin is covetousness (Ex. 20:17)

*Covetousness is an inordinate desire to enjoy
more money than we have,
or than God is pleased to give us.*

John Owen

Money itself is not bad; rather, the inordinate desire to have more than God has given us is what leads us into all kinds of wickedness (see [1 Tim. 6:10](#)).

Remember, that Habakkuk said the Chaldeans had a lust for more that was like death, never satisfied.

7 - Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

The particular way in which we are called to remember leaders in this passage is by

considering their way of life and to imitate it.

8-9 - *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*

Many new things tempt us to turn our hearts from Christ for the ‘new and improved.’

In Scripture, God reminds us of His faithfulness so that our hearts will be moved to cling to His promises and so that we will imitate his faithfulness.

As God is faithful to us, we are encouraged to remain faithful to him.

In this case, the new thing was really an old thing; perhaps something having to do with Jewish food rituals as the next two verses also suggest.

But our hearts, the writer reminds us, are not strengthened by food but by grace that comes only from Jesus.

The original audience of this epistle needed to hear this. They were wavering and needed something reliable upon which to cling. Under

persecution, they began to doubt the faithfulness of the Lord, whom they had confessed. They needed to know that the mighty acts by which Jesus accomplished salvation would one day finally rescue them from the presence of sin (9:28). They needed to know that He was the same one for whom the heroes of old waited (chap. 11). They needed to know that His superiority would last forever (7:28).

The old ways were just a shadow of Who was to come but Jesus is forever!

10-11 - *We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.*

From the earliest days of the Christian community, believers have had to face those who would try to reimpose some of the ritual requirements of the Law on Christian believers. Paul, for example, had to deal with Judaizers at Galatia who wanted to impose circumcision upon Gentile converts.

Such legalistic demands add nothing to the Gospel. In fact, they take away the freedom that Christ has brought by His atoning sacrifice and

resurrection. Moreover, the addition of such demands amounts to no less than another gospel ([Gal. 1:8](#)).

Faced with tremendous persecution, the call to return to the practices of the old covenant became quite inviting. This is why the author of the epistle takes such time in chapters 7–10 explaining that Jesus fulfills and supersedes the old covenant. In light of this reality, the last two chapters of his epistle focus on exhorting the audience to cling to Christ and strengthen themselves for the race ahead.

The reference here is probably to the old covenant animal sacrifices, which, though manifestations of God's grace, were not the actual means by which salvation was accomplished.

Under the Law, the priests were often allowed to eat portions of the animals that they offered up. However, this was not true of the Day of Atonement. On that day, the animals were burned outside the camp of Israel and no one could eat of them ([Lev. 16](#); [Heb. 13:11](#)). At that point, the sacrifice benefited no one, not spiritually or physically. But Christ is of forever benefit to us and in every way.

12 14 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate

12-14 - So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

For the writer, and for his readers, remaining faithful to the God of the Old Testament meant that they not return to the old covenant but that they honor the faith of the saints of the old covenant by their faithfulness to Jesus (chap. 11).

But Jesus had been crucified outside of Jerusalem as a criminal. And he is our altar. In order for these readers to be sanctified and to share in that altar, they had to be willing to suffer the same reproach as Jesus. The reason is that the earthly Jerusalem will not always exist, in fact, it will be razed in just a few years. But, the New Jerusalem will remain forever; its foundations unshaken and unshakable.

In another way, we too must leave the camp and join Christ in the wilderness. We must leave the uncleanness of the past behind and join Christ in the wilderness, for He alone can make us new. We may not have to leave the camp of old covenant sacrifices like the original audience

did. However, like them we must leave the past behind and cling to Christ. We must bear His reproach knowing that our citizenship is not in this present age, but in the city that will come when all of creation is finally renewed.

15 - Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

This faithfulness to Jesus is how the readers “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.” They do not do it with bulls, goats, lambs or doves but with their stated faithfulness to Jesus, by his name on their lips.

ILL - The Decian persecution resulted from an edict issued in 250 by the Emperor Decius ordering everyone in the Roman Empire (except for Jews, who were exempted) to perform a sacrifice to the Roman gods and the well-being of the Emperor. The edict ordered that the sacrifices be performed in the presence of a Roman magistrate, and a signed and witnessed certificate be issued to that effect. It was the first time that Christians had faced legislation forcing them to choose between their religious beliefs and death, although there is no evidence that Decius' edict was specifically intended to target Christians. The edict appears to have been

designed more as an Empire-wide loyalty oath. Nevertheless, a number of Christians were put to death for refusing to perform the sacrifices, many others apostatized and performed the ceremonies, and others went into hiding. The effects were long-lasting and caused tension between Christians who had performed the sacrifices or fled and those who had not, and left bitter memories of persecution. (Wikipedia)

16 - Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

This, in turn, meant that Christians suffered the loss of many things, sometimes everything. It became imperative for the church body to supplement those who endured loss.

True biblical piety always involves service — first to other believers in need and then to the needy in the unbelieving world. Under the old covenant, landowners were not to harvest every single speck of grain; rather, they were to leave some behind so that the poor could glean the fields and not go hungry (Lev. 19:9–10). Under the new covenant, we are reminded that true, living faith manifests itself in a willingness to share with the poor (James 2:14–17).

There are many ways we can fulfill this command to do good and to share with those in need. We can volunteer our time to service in the church. We can help to satisfy the needs of others in our congregation by donating money or possessions. We can support missionaries who preach the Gospel and perform works of mercy.

*When love does not prevail among us,
we not only rob men of their right,
But of God himself.*

John Calvin

17 - Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Bible passages such as 1 Timothy 3:1–13 teach that there are offices in the church for which men are set apart in order to meet the spiritual and physical needs of God’s people. These officers have particular duties to fulfill, but it must be noted that Scripture also prescribes duties to those who are not ordained to vocational ministry. In other words, the Lord also gives responsibilities to the laity.

First let us note that the author is not sneaking

First, let us note that the author is not speaking of unthinking, unquestioning, absolute obedience. Scripture never sets anyone in absolute authority over us besides God Himself. We are to submit to church leaders who in the main strive to preach the Word of God, teach what is in accord with sound doctrine, and love God's people.

When we have leaders, who love God and His people and seek to proclaim the truth and lead in accordance with it, our general disposition should be to follow their leadership. And we are to do so with joyful and willing obedience. Laypeople are to let their leaders direct them "with joy and not with groaning" (Heb. 13:17). That is to say, laypeople are to do what they can to make their leaders glad and eager to shepherd them. This means, among other things, not causing division over unnecessary matters, not slandering church leadership, and not refusing to help our leaders when we are asked and are available.

18-19 - *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.*

Is the writer in prison? He wants to maintain a

is the writer in prison? He wants to maintain a clear conscience and he wants to act honorably.

20 - Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Having instructed, chastised, and exhorted his readers, the author of Hebrews now declares a blessing upon them. Benedictions were common in Judaism, and the fact that the author includes one here adds evidence to the notion that he was of Jewish heritage and was well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This particular benediction illumines Jesus as a shepherd who was also a sheep, a shepherd who gave his blood and by that sacrifice, equips us to do God's will, to do what is pleasing in his sight.

God has chosen for Himself one flock and has appointed the Shepherd to guard over it. The power and worthiness of Jesus guarantees that not one of His sheep shall ever be snatched from His hand.

22-25 - *I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³ You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. ²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. ²⁵ Grace be with all of you.*

- a) *Bear with my word of 'brief' exhortation – He has taught doctrine to support his encouragement to remain faithful to Jesus*
- b) *Timothy has been released*
- c) *Greet all the leaders and all the saints*
- d) *Those who come from Italy send you greetings (Is the writer in Rome in prison or has he been in Rome in prison?)*
- e) *Grace be with you all*

*All of grace is my story
All the way from Earth to Glory
Since by grace He lifted me from sin and woe
Living grace He has extended
As on Him my heart depended
He'll give new grace when it's my time to go.*

*Grace not yet discovered
Grace not yet uncovered
Grace from His beautiful store*

*Grace from His bountiful store
Grace to cross the river
And race to face forever
But there'll be new grace I've not needed before.*

*There's been grace for every mile
There's been grace for every trial
There's been grace sufficient from His vast
supply
Grace to make my heart more tender
Grace to love and pray for sinners
But there'll be new grace when it's my time to
die.*

*Grace not yet discovered
Grace not yet uncovered
Grace from His bountiful store
Grace to cross the river
And grace to face forever
But there'll be new grace I've not needed before.*

- Tom Hayes