

Introduction to Hebrews—A Word of Exhortation

Heb 13:18-25

1 May 2022

Halifax, 10:30 AM

Introduction:

Today, we are starting a new sermon series in the epistle to the Hebrews.

- Over the past few months, I have found that I keep turning to this epistle because of its relevance to our congregation (and frankly to the church as a whole in North America).
- I will have more to say about that later, but that is the reason I have chosen Hebrews.

Often, I begin a new sermon series with a Psalm of Focus that is related to first part of the series we are doing,

- but this time and I am going to wait to introduce our first Psalm of Focus until next week.
- This week, I want to do a general introduction to the entire book of Hebrews.

The original recipients would have been expected to read the whole epistle in one sitting—a reading that would take about forty-five minutes.

- We will, of course, be working through it slowly over the course of several months, but I thought it would be good to begin by looking at what this letter is about in a more general way.
 - You can think of it as us flying in from above where we can see the whole epistle at once and look at how it all fits together.

For our scripture reading, I am going to read the concluding part of the letter, chapter 13, beginning in verse 18.

- Please give attention because this is the word of God.

Hebrews 13:18-25: Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably. 19 But I especially urge *you* to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. 20 Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing

in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen. 22 And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. 23 Know that *our* brother Timothy has been set free, with whom I shall see you if he comes shortly. 24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. 25 Grace *be* with you all. Amen.

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word.

In this conclusion, we see what kind of epistle the author considers it to be and what he expects us to do with it.

- If we are going to spend the next year or so looking at it, that seems like a pretty important thing for us to know.
- So let's begin with these questions:

I. What is this epistle? and, What are we do with it?

- The author tells us in Hebrews 13:22:
 - **13:22: “I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.”**
- A. We learn here that the author considers this book we call “Hebrews” to be a word of exhortation. That was his intention.
 1. The word translated *exhortation* is a word that is used of a direct address that is intended to help you in whatever way is needed.
 - It means to call alongside to help—to encourage, to comfort, to admonish, to exhort, to appeal to—there are many ways to translate it.
 - In fact, in this very verse, the root word is used twice... “I appeal to (or exhort) you, brethren,” and “bear with the word of exhortation...”
 - So the writer is exhorting the reader to be exhorted by what he has written!
 - It is important to know this.
 2. As an exhortation, this letter that calls for a response from the hearers.
 - It is not just to convey information or raise awareness, its intention is to change the behaviour of those who receive it.
 - It is an exhortation that is to be obeyed.
- B. But who is the author and who are the hearers that are to obey this epistle?
 1. The author calls them *brethren*. It is pretty clear from the contents of the letter that they were, indeed, Hebrew Christians, Jews who professed Christ as their Saviour.
 - That is the reason it was given this name—an epistle to the Hebrews.
 - It has carried as far back as we have records of it being called anything.
 - That it was written to Jews is clear because they are being exhorted not to return to the form of worship that they had practiced before Jesus came—with all the rituals and sacrifices and ceremonies at the temple.
 2. The author is unnamed, though it was widely held in the early church that the author was probably the Apostle Paul.
 - It is clear that the original recipients at least *knew* who the author was from all the personal references.
 - Even in this portion that we read, he asks for prayer and he speaks about his plans to come and see them with Timothy.
 - This letter was certainly received as scripture from the start as all the scriptures were.
 - However, there are some reasons for questioning Paul’s authorship.
 - Some of the fathers expressed uncertainty and Calvin and Luther did not think Paul was the author, but the reasons are mainly because it is written with a much more polished and refined Greek than Paul usually employed.
 - However, similar contrasts could be made by comparing John’s gospel with his epistles and the Book of Revelation.

- Perhaps he took more time or even had an editor—or wrote in a different style because he was addressing Jews rather than Gentiles.
3. In the end, what matters is not who wrote it or who it was first written to, but that all scripture is given by God to His church through the working of His Spirit.
- a. The author seemed to understand that he was writing scripture.
 - He speaks as one who speaks the oracles of God—he speaks with the authority of one who knows himself to be a prophet sent to speak God’s word.
 - Even here in Hebrews 13:22, he does not invite them to think about what he has said and take what they will, but rather to bear with the word of exhortation that he has given them.
 - Telling them to bear with the word of exhortation suggests that he expects that at times, they will find it difficult to obey what he has commanded.
 - Instead of bearing with it, they will be tempted to modify it—or at least soften the edges a bit—to compromise...
 - But the author is telling them that they must not!
 - They must receive it as from God—they must bear with it.
 - b. Since this is scripture, this has implications for us.
 - It means that it is for the church in every age, and that means that this exhortation is to be obeyed by us in our day.
 - Certainly, as with almost all the scripture, these words were written to address certain people in a certain situation,
 - but they were written in such a way that they have a clear message from God for the entire church in every age.
 - All scripture is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness—for all God’s people in all ages.
 - Therefore, we need to receive this word not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, that effectively works in those that believe.
 - Brothers and sisters, that means that we are to bear with these words of exhortation—we are to retain it and consistently apply it.
 - That is the way we are to respond to this letter.
- C. I have chosen to preach from this “word of exhortation” because it is an exhortation that is especially needed by the church today.
- And a word of exhortation that is especially needed by our congregation.
1. There is a lot of pressure on us today—an increasing amount—to be more pluralistic in our faith.
- You meet those who claim to be Christians all the time who will tell you that Christ is but one way of many good ways to follow.
 - We see many who wavering in their commitment to Him.
 - They walk as those who are unsure of Him, as those who are teetering between belief and unbelief.

- And we even see those who have drifted completely away from Him—think of it!—away from the one and only Saviour, the one who alone has the word of eternal life!
2. This book calls us to be all in for Christ!
- a. It sets Him forth as He is now revealed in the gospel as superior to all of the former ways that He was revealed.
 - Not that those ways were wrong, but that they were but shadows of what was to come.
 - The exhortation to the Hebrews was that they must not yield to the cultural pressure to return to their ceremonies, the priests and the temple with all its rites and rituals.
 - Christ is the one who came from heaven and who actually did what all of their rituals could only symbolise.
 - They were useful before He came, but it is harmful to continue them now that He has come—as if He hadn’t come!
 - These Hebrew Christians need to be all in for Christ...
 - Even though their Jewish relatives would look down on them—not for saying that Christ was Messiah so much as for forsaking the priests and the temple and all its beautiful rituals.
 - Some of them had lost their livelihood, their families, their political standing, their prestige—there were hard consequences for forsaking these rituals.
 - And some of them would have missed these things and their grandeur.
 - Then went from the magnificent temple with all of its priests, musicians, feasts, and glory—to simple meetings where the gospel was preached and psalms were sung in NT simplicity... where, instead of multiple washings, there was only one baptism for life; where in place of feasts, there was simple partaking of a bit of bread and wine in remembrance of Christ.
 - From the records we have, our worship is patterned after the worship that the apostles instituted and practiced.
 - Some of the Hebrew Christians would have had their relatives say, “You don’t even have a priest or a temple now,” and their thought was, “No, we don’t.”

➤ That was the temptation that these Hebrew Christians faced and that the epistle to the Hebrews addresses.

 - b. But we all have our own temptations to pull us away from Christ.
 - Dr. Robert Paul Martin points this out in his commentary.
 - Some of us come from Roman Catholicism—with all its grand rituals, its priests, its days of ritual feasting and fasting, and we miss some of that.

- Some of us come from Charismania—with its hyper-emotionalism and its man-centered philosophy that made us feel so loved, and perhaps we miss some of that.
 - Some of us come from religious liberalism with its inclusivity and skepticism that gives it respectability in the political arena and the academic community. We are tired of the disrespect we have from a more rigid adherence to Christ.
 - Still others come from shallow evangelicalism with its busyness and activity that is devoid of holiness and truth—where the gospel seemed more welcoming and nobody cared much if you slept with your girlfriend—you could still go on mission trips to the beach. You miss the looseness and positive spirit of all.
 - Others are perhaps from churches that were reformed, but formal, having little to say about living faith and fruitfulness as long as you held to the Catechism—comfort was found in knowing the right things, and you miss the pride that comes from not having to consider what you do.
 - And for some of us, we may be wavering between Christ and the world. We want to be the lord of our own life. Our temptation is to be free of God, of His worship, of His commandments.
- c. Hebrews is an exhortation to stop your dabbling with your vanities, whatever they may be, and to be all in for Christ.
- If your relationship with Christ is dead and barren and unsatisfying, the cause is probably exactly this—
 - You are not all out for Christ.
 - You are serving Him in a half-hearted way.
 - You are like a woman flirting with other men who complains about how unsatisfying her relationship is with her husband.
 - How could it be otherwise?
 - And with Christ, it is certain that no blame can be laid at His feet!
 - No, brothers and sisters, half-hearted service to Christ does not go well for anyone. Departing from Him is your ruin—it is to lose all!
 - My prayer is that all of us will bear with the word of exhortation in the letter to the Hebrews.
 - That is God’s message to us in this epistle.

II. Now I want to give you an overview of Hebrews so you can see how it exhorts you to be all out for Christ.

- A. First, let me tell you what Hebrews presupposes—it presupposes that we are glory-seekers. Not that we are actively doing so necessarily, but that we would grab glory if we could.
1. Yes, there is a sense in which all of us know that we are not what we ought to be as people—that we were made for something much greater.

- God created us in His image, and His purpose for doing that was that we might glorify Him by being like Him in our human nature—at our level...
 - That as it was with Jesus, His love, mercy, wisdom, justice, goodness, power, and holiness would be seen according to our capacity.
 - Deep down within, we all yearn for this, though many of us have given up in despair and look for comfort and diversion—or suicide.
 - While others pursue glory in broken and perverted ways that still leave them empty—perhaps becoming great in business or learning, but not in mercy and goodness, or very moral, but not merciful—or strong but not wise.
 - This glory is very dissatisfying and those who attain it in this twisted way often end up being the most miserable.
2. Hebrews tells us where true glory is to be found.
- It tells us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has become man, that as a man He attained the perfect glory that man was made for,
 - And that He is now able to bring us to perfection in glory.
 - Repeatedly we are told that Jesus is better—the Greek word translated by the word better is used thirteen times in Hebrews.
 - And fourteen times, the words related to the Greek word ‘telos’ are employed to speak of perfection, reaching the fullness of glory, becoming complete or all that we ought to be or need to be.
 - And always, the emphasis is that we reach glory through faith in Jesus.
 - We waste our time looking for it from other places—in particular from the religious rituals of the Old Covenant which must give way to Jesus.
 - What we need to take away from Hebrews is that if glory is not be found even in Old Testament ordinances that God appointed for a time,
 - how much less in any other way but Christ.
 - We are exhorted to be all in for Christ, for it is only in Him that we will find the glory for which we were made as human beings.
- B. In the first ten chapters, Hebrews assures you that Jesus is the way to glory, exhorting you to hold firmly to Him.
1. Hebrews 1:1 – 2:18 tells us how Jesus is the supreme revelation of God’s telos for man, far surpassing the angels as messengers.
 - Yes, we are exhorted at the start of chapter 2 to be sure that we hear Him as God’s ultimate perfect revelation lest we drift away and miss so great a salvation.
 - As God’s Son made flesh, He reaches God’s telos for man, becoming all that man is supposed to be; and we are told that He also brings those He calls His brethren with Him to glory through His suffering and death.
 - The exhortation is that we hear Him as God’s perfect, complete revelation.
 2. Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 tell how He is superior to Moses.

- Yes, Moses brought the people out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the promised land, and Joshua completed the job, giving Israel rest in the land.
 - But these chapters make it clear that the rest that Joshua gave them in the land was only a shadow and type of the rest that Christ has entered and into which He brings those who trust in Him.
 - In these chapters we are warned repeatedly to beware of a sinful heart of unbelief that would prevent us from entering God’s rest—the place of glory where man lives with God in perfect harmony.
 - It insists that the rest that Joshua gave them is nothing compared to the true rest that Jesus has entered and brings us into.
 - The exhortation here is to believe.
3. Hebrews chapters 5, 6 & 7 tell us how Jesus is the priest God appointed forever to bring us to glory.
- He not only reached God’s goal of all that a man should be and entered into God’s eternal rest;
 - He also reached God’s goal of all that a priest must be to save us sinners who come to Him for pardon.
 - In chapter 5, we are told how God appointed Him as priest and how He was the most compassionate of all priests because He actually took upon Himself the burden of our sin so that He cried out to God, offering up “prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears” until He was heard, being all that He needed to be as a priest to save us!
 - We are exhorted at the end of chapter 5 and on into chapter 6 to nail this down in our faith—the foundational truth that Christ is our priest—so that trusting Him we can move on to perfection without wavering.
 - We are urged to move forward because if we turn away from Christ, there is no other way to be saved.
 - The rest of chapter 6 and chapter 7 tell us how God has made it absolutely certain to us that Christ is the priest God appointed.
 - Not only did He call Him to be a priest, but He made a vow in which He promised that He would priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, meaning that He is a priest forever.
 - In this, He is contrasted with the priests of the old covenant who could not make us perfect (bring us to God’s telos—to glory).
 - They never attained to perfection as priests—they all died—but Jesus having attained perfection is established forever—He ever lives to make intercession for us.
 - We are fools to look to human priests now that Jesus has come.
 - New Testament worship does not have priests offering sacrifices. Instead it has ministers proclaiming the good news that Christ the priest has already offered the perfect sacrifice.

- The last verse of chapter 7 (v. 28) says, **For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.**
- Hebrews 8:1 then declares, **Now *this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest...***
 - So having seen that we have a perfect priest to bring us to glory...
- 4. Chapter 8:1 – 10:18 sets forth three ways that Christ’s ministry is superior to that of the old order.
 - The superior priest has a superior ministry in three ways.
 - First, we are told that He ministers at a superior tabernacle.
 - The tabernacle is superior because it is not a temple made with man’s hands—He actually enters into the very presence of God.
 - He brings us there.
 - We have no business dinking around with earthly temples to bring us to God—our priest ministers in glory and we have access to the Father, not on earth, but in glory, through Him.
 - Without Jesus, you have no access to God!
 - Second, we are told that He ministers through a superior sacrifice.
 - Especially in chapter 10, we told that He Himself became the sacrifice to take away our sins—so superior to the blood of bulls and goats that can never take away sin!
 - Heb 10:11-14 makes the contrast: **And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.**
 - Third, we are told that He ministers under a superior covenant.
 - This is called the New Covenant and it cannot fail because Christ, who is appointed to meet the conditions, did not fail.
 - In this covenant, we are kept by God forever once we have come to Christ for salvation so that we never depart from Him.
 - The two promises are laid out in 8:10-12 as well as 10:11-18:
 - First, God’s promise to write His law on our heart so that we will obey Him, now, by following Him and repenting, and eventually, as those who are fully without sin—all through the ministry of Christ by His Spirit.
 - Second, complete forgiveness of sin by Christ.

TRANS> So we see that Jesus brings us to perfection because He is:

- God’s perfect revelation of salvation,
- God’s perfect man who reached the goal and brings us with Him,

- God's perfect priest who was made a priest forever to always make intercession for us,
- And the priest with a ministry that brings us to God, secures God's covenant, and offers the only sacrifice that can truly atone for our sins.

III. The rest of Hebrews is pretty much nothing but exhortation to trust in Jesus!

A. Chapter 10:19-39 tells us to come to God with unwavering trust in Jesus.

- We are to draw near with confidence because He has washed away our sins, and we are to encourage each other.
- We are solemnly warned not to turn from Him because if we do, we will be rejected and punished with extreme punishment—the horror of regarding the sacrifice of Christ as worthless... but what glory belongs to those who embrace it.
- This is not something to waver back and forth about. If all this is true, we need to be all out for Jesus.

B. Chapter 11 sets before us examples of faith from the Old Covenant—examples of unwavering trust.

- It shows those who, even under the shadows, were wholly devoted to what God had promised and who lived as if it were true.
- They chose to follow the Lord rather than riches, honours, and pleasures, often suffering affliction and death in this sinful world because of their allegiance to Him.
 - They knew that the glories of this world could never match the glory of the city that God had promised them—and they showed their faith by their life.

C. Chapter 12 exhorts us to run with patience the race that is marked out before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

- We are told here that we will have to go through times of rigorous training in this world, but that it will be worth it if we hang on to our Lord through it all because in the end, we will be brought to glory.
- It is foolish to turn back when the penalty is so severe and the prize is so great...
 - And when it is Jesus who keeps us and who brings us to glory if we will lean on Him.

D. In chapter 13:1-19, we are exhorted to live in the church as those who are heirs of God's glory—the promise of the glory in Christ.

1. First, that we are love and help each other as those who inherit the promises.
2. Second, that we are life in sexual purity, bringing forth children for the Lord.
3. Third, that we are to covet God's promised blessing and presence instead of the treasures of this world.
4. Fourth, that we are to follow those who taught us—continuing in our confession of the truth of God's word.
5. Fifth, that we fully avoid all rituals except the ones that God has appointed for us in the New Testament—and that we are to do this even if we are opposed for it.

6. Sixth, that instead of unauthorised rituals, we are to busy ourselves with praise from our lips, generous giving, faithful service to one another, and submission to the elders.
 7. Seventh, that we should pray for missionaries and their ministry.
- E. In 13:20-21, a benediction is pronounced that is related to the entire book...
- Jesus has attained to perfection as our priest, so the blessing is that through His ministry and sacrifice we might attain to glory and immortality through Him.
 - It reads, ²⁰ **Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, ²¹ make you complete** [here is another word that is often translated perfect] **in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Conclusion:

So in the name of Jesus, I exhort you to bear with the word of exhortation in this letter.

- Do not waver back and forth about following Jesus.
- Go all out for Him.
- What do you have without Him?