

Epistle to the Hebrews Part V – Table of Contents (tentative)

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Week 1: The Arena of Faith**Text Reading: Hebrews 12:1 - 2**

*“Once witnesses for God,
they are now witnesses of us their brethren.”*
(Franz Delitzsch)

The study of History has fallen on hard times. It was once the most interesting part of a child's education: an active participation of present generations with those long gone. But the idea that the human race is not only evolving, but is in some respects *in charge* of this evolution, had created a breach between the past and the present. We no longer think we can learn from those who have gone before us, though there are still some of us left who think that this mistaken arrogance will merely cause mankind to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. It is still possible, of course, that we may witness a renaissance of History in our day, or perhaps in a day to come...at least it is something worth hoping for.

But here is a metaphysical challenge: what if the past is not really gone? What if the people and places and events that we read about in the History books are still, in some sense at least, alive? This is not as ridiculous a thought as it may seem, for we all confess that past, present, and future are 'now' to God. He who dwells in Eternity possesses the ever-present Now in His infinite mind. Certainly we cannot understand in our finite minds how this can be so, but that fact does not make the other less true. Even in this book of Hebrews we have read that *“all things are open and laid bare to Him with whom we have to do.”* It is not unreasonable to include the past with the category of 'all things.'

This concept of a still-present past has dominical sanction, for Jesus Himself, in a disputation with the scribes and Pharisees, said that God is *“the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”* (Matt. 22:32). If we would contemplate this statement with a little depth of thought and

imagination, we might react as did the Lord's first audience: "*When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.*" (Matt. 22:33) We tend to think of those who have lived and died before our time as continuing in their existence as disembodied souls, and there is much Scriptural warrant for this view. But mankind has also always had a sense that those who have departed are never really gone. To be sure, this view has suffered the same corruption and perversion due to sin that all human thought and philosophy has suffered. Yet the universality of thought patterns throughout time and across all races, with regard to the relationship of the dead and the living, warrants some consideration of the matter. This is especially true as the writer of Hebrews brings the two groups together here in the opening verse of Chapter 12.

In light of this mental exercise, consider the "*cloud of witnesses*" of which we read in Hebrews 12:1. Clearly they are those of whom the writer has most recently written in Chapter 11 - the 'heroes' of the faith, by the grace of God. In one respect they are now 'out of time,' since they are dead. They are not of our time, yet when they are brought to our attention they are still of their own time. They 'live' in those deeds done while they lived upon the earth. On the one hand they no longer belong to 'time,' but on the other hand they forever belong to their time. The beauty of History is that, while those who have lived before us can never belong to *our* time, through their lives *we* can partake of *their* time (at this point you reach for the bottle of Excedrin...). And they are not locked in their time, but now stand, in some sense, outside of time looking on. They who once witnessed for God during their sojourn on earth, are now the witnesses of our sojourn, as we will be of those who come after us.

Protestants recoil at such thoughts, for they often fear that it will somehow justify the Roman Catholic teaching of the intercession of the saints. Or maybe such thinking will motivate prayers for the dead. Paul speaks enigmatically of 'baptism for the dead' in I Corinthians 15; maybe this has something to do with that. All in all, it tends to be a topic avoided rather than investigated. Granted,

too little is said about the status of the dead, their relationship to the living, and the continuing existence of their deeds, to build a doctrine. Yet we have Samuel conjured up by the witch at En-dor, and Moses & Elijah appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration, and this 'great cloud of witnesses' here in Hebrews 12 - enough to justify some consideration of the matter.

The dead are not gone, but rather continue to live in the very deeds of their lives. They do not continue to 'live' in any meaningful *earthly* sense of the word, and they remain associated inextricably with their earthly lives, at least as far as we are concerned. Their history continues to play out before us, as ours will before our posterity, a never-ending scene acted out in the eternal now of God's infinitude. At the consummation of the ages all of these individual pasts will merge into one forever now - for we read that in the New Jerusalem of the New Heaven and New Earth, the creation timepieces of the Sun and the Moon will no longer be there. At that point, somehow, all of our lives will appear in one connected and comprehensible whole - all of our histories will be there, purged of sin and made glorious through the history of Jesus Christ. (No, two Excedrin is enough...no more). Lesslie Newbigin had a sense of the timelessness of the future state when he contemplated the Christian hope.

That perfect society, the fully accepted and accomplished rule of God in men's hearts, therefore is the object of a Christian's hope and longing. And he knows that even though he himself must go out into the darkness of death, and that even though all his efforts for the creation of a better society on earth must in the end be buried and forgotten, yet none of this is lost. In that day it will all be found to be there raised up, transfigured. It will be seen that all the labors of faithful souls to create true human fellowship have been not lost, but taken up and consummated in the perfection of God's Kingdom. That is the proper object of hope.¹

¹ Newbigin, Lesslie; *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2003); 50.

This is not a vain attempt to pry into those mysterious things that belong to the Lord our God. It is rather, an exhortation to read verse 1 of Hebrews 12 in a new light, perhaps, or at least with a more vivid imagination regarding the ever-present reality of History in our midst. Before digging into the verse itself, and its context, let the lyrics of Steve Green's classic song form the backdrop of our study:

We're pilgrims on the journey
Of the narrow road
And those who've gone before us line the way
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses
Let us run the race not only for the prize
But as those who've gone before us
Let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives

*Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
May the fire of our devotion light their way
May the footprints that we leave
Lead them to believe
And the lives we live inspire them to obey
Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful*

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone
And our children sift through all we've left behind
May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover
Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (12:1)

The scene of this verse is the arena of the Greek games, where the athletic sport of running was manifest in many forms – marathon, decathlon, relays, etc.

Some commentators have managed to find the cloud in the wilderness in this verse, and liken the Christian's sojourn on earth to the wanderings of the children of Israel for forty years. But that just does not work exegetically; the 'cloud' here simply indicates a multitude, as the word often connotes in the Bible and in classical Greek literature. Besides, Christians are not led through their journey on earth by those believers who have since died, as the children of Israel were led by the cloud in the wilderness. Such an interpretation is a prime example of the danger of latching onto a word and making it perform feats of exegetical magic.

This is the arena of the Greek games, and the runners are surrounded by spectators, and encouraged in their vigorous endeavors by the cheering crowds. The Greek word used for these games is *agonia*, which has come into the English language as 'agony' - intense emotion and exertion, for that is what the ancient Greek games required of the participants. And it is what the Christian life requires of every believer,

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

(Philippians 2:12-13)

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

(I Corinthians 9:24-25)

The biblical writers know of no short-cuts in the Christian life. It is a race that must be run by every participant, and no 'second blessing' or 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' will serve to shorten the track or make the effort less arduous. The spectators of those who have gone before us are not participants, nor are they coaches, nor can we receive any assistance from them. Protestants need not fear that such a concept as presented in Hebrews 12:1 will lead to the 'intercession of

the saints.’ No such doctrine can be teased from these words. Yet there is tremendous encouragement from the crowd, in our Christian race as in a Grecian foot race. What is more, those who watch have themselves run the race before us. They are not only excited for our progress, they are also sympathetic to our struggle. But one can also assume them to be unsympathetic to slackers and quitters.

It is a vivid word picture, but it need not be less true for that. “The heroes of faith whose conflicts are over, and who living now in that heavenly world into which the blood of Jesus has admitted them, are not indifferent spectators of what goes on here; between the church above and the church below there is a real and living intercommunion.”² It is, therefore, another untenable twist of the context for commentators to make the living Christian runner to be the spectator of the ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have gone before.³ It is clear from Scripture – and unmistakably so in verse 2 – that the runner’s eyes are not gazing around the stadium at the crowd. Rather they are *‘fixed upon Jesus.’* No, it is the cloud of past believers who now witness the race and, to paraphrase another phrase from Hebrews, *‘though dead, yet they cheer!’*

[T]he ancient worthies whose actions are recorded in Scripture are represented as spectators; their deeds, and sufferings, and triumphs, have the same influence on the minds of the believing Hebrews, as the interested countenances and encouraging plaudits of the surrounding crowd had on the minds of the Grecian combatants. The solitary Christian, in the exercise of faith, finds that, under the influence of that divine principle, he is not solitary. The inspired history is converted as it were into a glorious ampitheatre, from which, while he treads the arena, or courses along the stadium, a countless host of venerable countenances beam encouragement, and ten thousand times ten thousand friendly voices seem to proclaim, ‘So run that ye may obtain; we once struggled as you now struggle, and you shall conquer as we have conquered. Onward! Onward!’⁴

² Delitzsch, Franz; *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock; 1978 reprint); 298.

³ This is the interpretation of William Lane, following F. F. Bruce.

⁴ Brown, John; *Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Banner of Truth Trust; 1964); 602.

History has this effect on those who study it – both sacred history and secular. The good and the bad from the past are ever before the present. Therefore we are admonished in Hebrews 3 not to follow the example of the Israelites in the wilderness, who perished through unbelief. And we are told by the Apostle Paul that the things which have been recorded are for our encouragement and instruction (Romans 15:4). Perhaps it is not so much that those who fail to remember history are doomed to repeat it, as that those who ignore history live in a vacuum. They are truly alone.

There is a tacit assumption in the writer's exhortation that each and every believer will both *want* to complete the race, and *will* complete the race. "The Christian must make progress; he must grow in knowledge, and faith, and humility, and usefulness, and universal holiness."⁵ Modern preachers would have runners milling about at mid-field, sitting on the sidelines, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes (well, maybe not the cigarettes) and have the great cloud of witnesses cheering loudly all the same. To so many 'free grace' preachers, to profess Christ at any point in one's life is to win the race; what happens after that is immaterial. But how can one coordinate such a view with what we read here? The way such teachers do so is to say that those who exert themselves in the race will win 'rewards' in heaven, while the rest are just happy to get to heaven. But no allowance is made in Scripture for those who effortlessly make it into heaven.

For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(II Peter 1:4-8)

⁵ Brown; 605.

So the exhortation to every believer is to run, and to do so with the intent, as Paul puts it, *to obtain* the crown. The effort is constant and difficult and will brook no hindrances. Thus the admonition to “*lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles.*” This is a favorite phrase among moralist preachers, and has often been taken from its context and ranged boldly against particular sins – especially those particular sins that particularly provoke the preacher. But the phrase is very general and generic, and there is no indication that any particular sin is in the writer’s mind. Indeed, if there were such a target sin in mind, that sin would be the one against which this entire letter has cautioned: the sin of apostasy.

Perhaps in an indirect ‘proof’ that this letter was originally a sermon, the word used to modify ‘sin’ – translated by the New American Standard Version as “*so easily entangles*” – is a true *hapax legomena*, a ‘one and only once word.’ Not only does this word occur nowhere else in Scripture (including the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint), it occurs nowhere in extant Greek literature. We may say that it is a ‘made up’ word by our author, something that is perhaps easier to do in an oration than in a letter. The meaning of the word, therefore, cannot be derived from prior usage but rather must be pieced together from its etymology and from the context. Various English translations go their own way, but all seem to arrive at basically the same place.

the sin which so easily entangles us (NASV)

the sin which doth so easily beset us (KJV)

the sin which so easily ensnares us (NKJV)

sin which clings so closely (ESV)

The compound word contains the preposition *peri* which connotes ‘surrounding.’ Coupled with the first word in the clause, *encumbrance*, and taking into account the context of the Grecian games, it is fairly clear that the writer is admonishing every believer to a diligent effort of removing all hindrances from the successful prosecution and completion of the race. The

historical context confirms this interpretation: Greek men ran races completely naked. In this, at least, the more recent Olympic Games are approaching the reality of the ancient ones.

Are encumbering and entangling sins only those that preachers so often want to rail against: drunkenness, homosexuality, fornication, lust, greed, and the like? Are not these grosser sort of sins characteristic of those who are not even in the race at all? The Greek runners were *athletes*; they were disciplined and practiced. So many of the sins that have been condemned under the rubric of Hebrews 12:1 are as apropos to the meaning of the writer as a Greek runner wearing a parka. No, the context demands that we understand this double clause as referring to *anything* in our lives that would interfere with our successfully running the race set before us. "Indeed, every earthly inclination – every earthly pursuit, however innocent in itself, when it interferes with the cultivation of Christian dispositions and the practice of Christian duties, becomes a weight which must be laid aside."⁶

The first half of Hebrews 12 is all of one piece, and the opening verses must be understood in the light of the subsequent ones. The writer will momentarily move on to discuss Christian discipline, which as we will see in those verses does not mean punishment, but rather preparedness. As a coach disciplines a runner in preparation for the race, so also God disciplines His children for the race of faith. And set against this 'sin which so easily entangles' is that 'sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord' (12:14). The context is not about those sins that are completely incongruous with Christian profession, but rather with "*that law at work in my members*" of which Paul writes in Romans 7.

But if a particular sin must be labeled as the encumbering and entangling one, then let it be that sin against which the writer of Hebrews has consistently warned his readers throughout this epistle. "*Take care, lest there be in any one of*

⁶ Brown; 608.

you an evil heart of unbelief that falls away from the living God.” (3:12) “Whatever darkens our views or shakes our confidence with respect to any of the great principles of our Christian faith, cuts the very sinews of dutiful exertion, so that it becomes very difficult, or rather altogether impossible, to persevere in running ‘the race that is set before us.’”⁷

Perhaps the particular sin of apostasy is not so dangerous today as it was among the Hebrew Christians who first received this message, and perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit inspired the author to leave his admonition undefined. Nevertheless, the race is still on and every believer a runner in it. “The combined expression covers any encumbrance that would handicap a runner, and by analogy anything that would interfere with responsible commitment to Jesus Christ. This might have reference to the love of wealth, attachment to the world, preoccupation with earthly interests, or self-importance. Christians are to divest themselves of every association or concern that would limit their freedom for Christian confession.”⁸

The closing phrase of verse 1 ties the writer’s thought back to Chapter 10, “*and run with endurance the race set before us.*” Endurance. That is the theme of these latter chapters of the epistle, excellently suited to that particular danger that the Hebrews Christians faced: falling away from the faith. The closing verses of Chapter 10 reach forward across the illustrative parenthetical Chapter 11 to the opening verses of Chapter 12.

*For you have need of **endurance**, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised..But **we are not of those who shrink back** to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul. (10:36-39)*

The analogy of the Greek games does not hold true throughout, for the Greek runner ran in competition against all of the other runners and only one runner took the prize. Believers, however, run together, “*strengthening the hands*

⁷ Brown; 611.

⁸ Lane, William; *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Word Books; 1991); 409

that are weak and the knees that are feeble” (12:12) so that all who run not only complete the race but also win the prize. There is a great deal of encouragement in this passage to keep the believer running, not the least of which is the fact that all run together. There is also the fact that the ‘race’ is ‘set before us.’ In other words it is, like the Grecian races, an established course – one laid out for us by the sovereign providence of God. Its length, its obstacles, its straight-aways and its curves, its downhill and uphill parts, have all been determined, though perhaps no two races are identical in their course. The one characteristic of every believer’s course is that it will require *endurance*, perseverance to the end.

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2)

The author has just completed a litany of faithful men and women of God who have completed their race and now, as it were, sit in the stands watching those believers now running. But, in reality, none of them matter. Only One matters, the One who set the course himself and then ran it to perfection – the *Author* and *Finisher* of this race of faith, Jesus Christ. Here is the passage that forever excludes the interpretation of the intercession of the saints on behalf of living believers. The notion that any previous runner could offer assistance, or even sufficient motivation alone to bring a current believer successfully to the finish line is not only ludicrous, it is blasphemous. We are not exhorted to fix our eyes on ‘Saint’ Christopher, or the ‘blessed’ Virgin Mary, or any other alleged intercessor, but only on the One who can and does ‘ever live to make intercession’ for us, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is here referred to as the 'Author' and the 'Perfecter' of the faith. The words are variously translated in our English versions, because they have various meanings. The first, *Author*, has already been used with respect to Jesus, in Chapter 2,

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the [author](#) of their salvation through sufferings.
(2:10)

The Greek word is *archagon* (αρχηγον), which contains the same root from which we get 'architect' or 'archaeology.' The sense of the word group is that of beginnings - that of the formative point in time and of the effort that brought things into being. As it is used with respect to Jesus and the race of faith, the *archagon* is "a forerunner or leader in the fray, one who is the first to do or accomplish anything."⁹ In this sense we may view Jesus from eternity past as the One who sovereignly ordained the race that was to be run, and we may view Jesus in the course of His own earthly race, which He ran to perfection from start to finish. And it is to the finishing of the race that the second term points.

Here we have the Greek word *teleiotain* (τελειωτην) which contains the common root, *teleos*. This root and family of words always connotes an end or purpose both set before and reached. It the underlying reason for why things are, and the fruition or consummation toward which all things move. It is the purpose of God, which is the outworking of His will. Simply put, it is the end of the race, the goal and purpose of which is to attain. And Jesus is the *teleiotain* as much as the *archagon*, the end as well as the beginning, for "He, by His Spirit enables men first to believe, preserves them believers, and increases their faith, till that, like every part of the Christian character, is made perfect in heaven."¹⁰ Delitzsch adds, "He is the captain of faith, because He has trod the way of faith triumphantly before us, making a way for those who follow; and the finisher of

⁹ Delitzsch; 302.

¹⁰ Brown; 611.

faith, because having reached the goal Himself, He lead all who follow Him to the same goal.”¹¹ And the psalmist, who knew the pain and disappointment of the race itself, had no less a hope in Christ than we do,

*Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.* (Psalm 73:23-24)

Lest any reader succumb to a sense of drudgery, or permit himself a sort of depressed resignation to the *‘race set before him,’* the author sets before him the heart of Jesus while He ran the race. *For the joy set before Him,* he endured all. There has been a lot written about what this joy was – the joy of doing the will of the Father, the joy of seeing all of His brethren saved and their sins atoned, the joy of triumphing over the enemies of Jehovah both human and angelic, the joy of reaching the end of the race victoriously and taking his place as the God-Man at the right hand of majesty. There is no need to choose among these options, for they are all components of what Jesus Himself referred to as *“My joy made full”* (John 17:13).

This is not some Pollyanna mentality that denies the struggles and the obstacles of a life lived in devotion to God through Jesus Christ. It is, rather, a persevering focus on the One who both initiated and finished the same race *while* encountering the struggles and obstacles. It is the settled knowledge of faith that the same joy awaits all who finish the course, and the encouragement that all who run in Christ will finish the course. It is not a denial of reality, nor is it a form of Christian Couéism (‘every day in every way I’m getting better and better’). It is an attitude, that attitude which was found in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5), and ought to be found in every believer.

¹¹ Delitzsch; 303.

Week 2: The Meaning of Affliction**Text Reading: Hebrews 12:3 - 8**

*"They were not inveigled into the profession of that religion by false representations of ease and worldly comfort."
(John Brown)*

"This is the man who hears the word of the Gospel, and immediately receives it with great joy." Such is Jesus' explanation of the stony ground hearer in the Parable of the Sower. This is the one who, when affliction or persecution arise, quickly falls away from his profession, proving there to be no root to his faith. Note that: *"when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."* Just as 'immediately' as he receives the word with great joy, he 'immediately' falls away when affliction or persecution arise *because of the word*. Note that carefully, for it is the very same thing that the author of Hebrews is warning against in Chapter 12 - the believer's response to affliction. And notwithstanding the modern preachers who assure even the backslider that a previous profession of faith is sufficient for all eternity - regardless of present or future apostasy - the fact of the matter is that God is not pleased with the one who falls away: *"But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him."* (10:38)

One question that is left unanswered by the Lord in His interpretation of the Parable of the Sower is just *why* the stony heart hearer received the word *with great joy*. This is an important question, because it may give some clues as to when the 'gospel' being preached is not a true Gospel at all. Could it be that the hearer was presented with all of the good things contained in the Good News - forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and so forth - but never told of the persecution and affliction that would accompany every profession of faith in Jesus Christ? Perhaps the gospel was long on *"For God so loved the world..."* and short on *"All who would live godly in Christ will suffer persecution."* Maybe the evangelist soothed the sinner's ears with the comforting (though unbiblical) *"God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,"* while conveniently leaving out the more

distressing (though biblical) promise, *“an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”* (John 16:2) It could be that the sinner was promised that if he became a Christian his marriage would be happy, his business would prosper, his children would turn out wonderfully, and the cancer raging through his body would disappear. Does this sound familiar? It is just the basic ‘gospel’ message of the modern western Church. Giving promises that God did not give; and withholding warnings that He did. Is it any wonder that, having been ‘saved’ through such a message, the stony ground hearer would immediately fall away when the reality of affliction and persecution crash into his life?

The author of Hebrews knew the foundation upon which the faith of his audience was laid. “When they became Christians, they were told plainly at what hazard they became so; they were not inveigled into the profession of that religion by false representations of ease and worldly comfort.”¹² We hear a lot of thanksgiving lifted up today on account of the ‘gospel’ having been preached at a funeral, or a wedding, or shared with a barber during a haircut, or picked up off the street in a tract. Maybe so; and maybe not. The Gospel does not come in parts – it is a composite whole that includes the truth of sin and judgment along with the good news of salvation and eternal life. It contains no false assurances of ‘ease and worldly comfort,’ but it does contain promises of rejection, affliction, and persecution *on account of the word*. Any man who withholds part of the message is not an evangelist; he is a deceiver. The stony ground hearer will suffer for his own sins, to be sure, but undoubtedly he will curse the preacher who fed him gospel cream without the gospel bitters.

Knowing as he does that this was not the Gospel that had been preached to the Hebrew Christians, our author has a greater degree of assurance that those to whom he writes will, by God’s grace, stand firm. *“But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though*

¹² Brown; *Epistle to the Hebrews*; 618-19.

we are speaking in this way," he writes in Chapter 6, verse 9. And in the closing verses of Chapter 10, *"But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul."* Yet he cannot be sure of the steadfastness of each and every professing believer in this congregation; only God infallibly knows the heart. So he continues to exhort his hearers to perseverance, especially in the face of the very same affliction that costs the stony ground hearer his soul.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. (12:3)

Another word of the Lord that is too often forgotten among stony ground hearers and the evangelists who lead them astray, is recorded in Matthew 10,

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household! Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. (Matthew 10:24-26)

The condition that is to be expected by the disciple is the same condition that was encountered by the Master. *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own."* (John 15:18-19) Thus the author of Hebrews properly draws his readers' attention to the One who suffered before them – not *instead of* them – but before them. Peter writes in regard to suffering for righteousness' sake, *"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps."* (I Peter 2:21) Therefore, when a believer encounters affliction or persecution on account of his testimony of faith in Jesus Christ, his meditation ought to be on Christ Himself, *who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself*. The same Spirit who sustained Christ (humanly speaking) is within the believer to sustain him through the same trials.

A caveat is in order here, and one that applies to the whole of Chapter 12. That is, that there are many different types of affliction and persecution in the world - the world may 'love its own,' but it is the love of demons that often turns violent against its own. The Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, etc. of Europe suffered great affliction and persecution under the tyranny and murder of Nazi Germany, but this was no indication of the validity of the Christian faith of these groups. Affliction does not *prove* Christianity; that is one aspect of the caveat. Another is that affliction and persecution is, at times, self-inflicted. A professing believer might suffer affliction when his family finds out about his faith. Or he might suffer persecution because he is an obnoxious jerk, constantly upbraiding everyone he meets, without grace and devoid of love. It would be a travesty of hermeneutics to grant the comfort of Hebrews 12 to such cases as these. The writer speaks of affliction that cannot be rooted in the victim's own personality, nor in his own mistakes or conduct; it is true suffering *on account of the word*.

Having said that, we must also note that the 'sin' of which he speaks in this passage is not indwelling sin, not even 'besetting sins' - those sins that each individual believer finds difficult to overcome. This has been a popular angle taken among modern commentators in their exegesis of Hebrews 12, but it betrays the individualizing tendency of so much of modern evangelicalism. The *example* to all believers is Jesus, *who suffered hostility from sinners against Himself*. Certainly this was not due to a personality problem in Christ Jesus! Never was there a man as gracious and winsome as He was. Nor could it be that the struggles He endured were on account, or against, indwelling sin, for He was without sin. It is only proper that the words we read in Hebrews 12 be interpreted in the context, not only of Hebrews 12, but of the entire epistle.

The most serious danger facing the Hebrew believers was that of apostasy, and particularly a falling away from the Christian faith and falling back into Mosaic Judaism. The temptation to do this was exacerbated by the affliction and persecution many were encountering from their 'kinsmen

according to the flesh,' the Jews. They, too, were suffering great hostility from sinners – not because of their own sin, but because of their profession of faith in Jesus the Messiah. That remains the contextual venue of application for this whole passage, the attitude with which believers in every age are to bear up under affliction and persecution which arises on account of their testimony of faith.

The author furnishes believers with a strong antidote against discouragement: meditation upon the sufferings of our Lord in the same circumstances. This antidote only works, however, for those who are acquainted with the history of Jesus as it is recorded in the Bible. There are a multitude of books on the Christian market today that purport to encourage believers through difficult times, and churches are considered remiss if they do not have weekly support groups to help believers through divorce, bankruptcy, drug abuse, etc. But the writer to the Hebrews offers an object of consideration that will guard the believer's heart, so that he will not "*become weary and discouraged in his soul.*" But in order to meditate profitably on Jesus, one must come to know Him as He is revealed in the Holy Word, and to grow in that knowledge through repeated travels through the gospels.

There are certain evidences when the 'picture' of Jesus that supposedly gives comfort to the afflicted believer is, in fact, a false one. The most obvious one is when the 'picture' is a literal portrait, when believers take comfort in a picture 'of Jesus' hanging on their living room wall. The folly of this ought to be self-evident. But there are more subtle errors, too. One is the mental image that always arrives at Psalm 23, "*The Lord is my Shepherd...*" and while this is a wonderfully true picture of Jesus, it is an incomplete one and insufficient to truly sustain the believer in affliction. There is a chronic view within the Church, popping up with degrees of favor over the course of Church History, that enduring hostility against the faith *always* looks like a sheep being led to the slaughter. Yet we see both the Lord Himself and the Apostle Paul at times

vigorously engaging their opponents in debate and, sometimes, with some indecorous language thrown in. John the Baptist was not being 'un-Christian' (an anachronism, yes) when he called the Pharisees a 'brood of vipers,' nor was Jesus being uncharitable in calling them 'whitewashed sepulchers.' Consider Paul's response to being unjustly abused in the presence of the Sanhedrin,

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"
(Acts 23:1-3)

Granted, when Paul was told that the man to whom he spoke was the High Priest, his proper respect for the office caused him to apologize. Still, the point of all this is that the act of imitating Jesus in circumstances of affliction does not always look the same in each and every occurrence. It is, therefore, not so much *how* Jesus responded to hostility that is to be imitated, but rather the attitude with which He responded. And in the context of this letter to the Hebrews, that most assuredly includes a steadfast refusal to back down. This was admirably displayed by Peter and John in the presence of the same men who sent their Lord to the cross,

So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."
(Acts 4:18-20)

There is another aspect of the imitation of Jesus' attitude toward opposition that ought to be pointed out here. Unlike Jesus, the believer does not know the heart of every man. Jesus *knew* the heart condition of those who came against Him, and was able to respond with infallible insight into their eternal destiny. We do not have this knowledge. But we do know that there are two

classes of opponents: those who are among the elect yet uncalled, and those who are truly reprobate. We cannot know, however, if a particular opponent is a Saul of Tarsus acting in ignorance, or an Alexander of Ephesus who later did the apostle Paul such harm. For the sake of the one category, that of the uncalled elect, we must leave room for God's grace; and in the case of the other, for God's vengeance.

You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. (12:4)

The consideration of Jesus the Forerunner has not ceased; verse 4 is a logical continuation of verse 3. It is, therefore, implied that Jesus *did* strive against sin unto bloodshed. Perhaps Gethsemane comes to mind, and the anguish Jesus suffered when "*His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.*" (Luke 22:44). And it may be said that Gethsemane was not far from the author's mind in this epistle; it does seem to be the historical referent to an earlier passage,

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.
(Hebrews 5:7)

But an allusion to Gethsemane does not quite fit the context of Hebrews 12, nor can it be said that the 'sin' against which the believer is striving can be likened to the assumption of *sin* by the Son of God just prior to His self-sacrifice. The context forces us to remain in the amphitheatre, at the games, though we do progress from the running venues to the final and most physical (and most dangerous) of the Pan-Hellenic events: boxing. A forerunner to the gladiatorial contests in the Roman era, the Greek athletes finished their 'course' of competition in a boxing match, with each contestant armed not only with his fists but also often with iron or lead woven into their hand wraps. It was considered to be the most dangerous; an inscription dating from the first century before

Christ states, "A boxer's victory is gained in blood." The same imagery is used by the apostle Paul in reference to his own struggle: "*Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.*" (I Cor. 9:26)

The actual word used in verse 4 of Hebrews 12 is, indeed, the term used with reference to the wrestling and boxing matches in the ancient games: *antagonidzomenoi*. The root of this word is where we get the English word *antagonism*, and the deeper root still is the source of *agony*: *agonidzō* which literally means, *I struggle*. There is something poignant in the realization that not only is the Christian's struggle in this world comparable to an athletic contest, but the very word used to describe it implies such vigorous striving as is contained in the word *agony*. This is, of course, not the degree to which most of us exercise – if we exercise at all.

William Lane notes the progression of intensity from verses 1 and 2 to verse 4. "The image in v. 4, however, is decidedly more combative. It is no longer the footrace that is in view but the boxing arena, involving bloodshed and even death...The expression is drawn from the games, in which the most dangerous contest was the armed boxing match. Boxing was the supreme test of the pentathlon, and bloody wounds were commonplace."¹³ It does stimulate the thought: when you were first introduced to Christ and Christianity, was it portrayed in such terms?

Verse 4 is another place where the individualizing tendency of modern hermeneutics is evident. It is *sin* against which the believer strives – boxes, actually – but what exactly is that 'sin' of which the writer speaks? The modern exegesis tends toward seeing here the believer's struggle against indwelling sin and against sins of both commission and omission that are all too frequent in the Christian's life. The lesson thus taught is not in error, it just does not flow from this passage. The danger of such an interpretation, therefore, is not that of leading someone into falsehood. Rather the danger is of missing the truth.

¹³ Lane; *Hebrews 9-13*; 417.

Delitzsch writes, "*hamartia* [sin] is not here inward temptations in men's own minds to apostasy, but personal wickedness in others, *i.e.*, in the open enemies of Christianity, seeking by various kinds of violence or persuasion to turn away Christians from their faith."¹⁴

Thus when the author says that his readers have not yet resisted (strived) against sin to the point of shedding blood, he speaks of their steadfast faithfulness to Christ in the teeth of the consistent and sometimes violent opposition of others. The reference to Jesus as the example *par excellence* of this pugilistic struggle makes it clear that the analogy of the Greek game cannot be stretched too far. Jesus did not exact blood from His opponents, nor may believers do so. Nor may the Church; so much for the Crusades being holy war.¹⁵ The blood that was shed was Christ's; and the blood that has not yet been shed by the Hebrew Christians was their own. The author in no way implies that they will not be called to resist to this extreme, and even mortal, point; only that they have not yet done so.

The statement, then, is actually both a comfort and a caution. Times of peace are never meant to be times of laxity – whether it is the athlete in between contests, the nation in between wars, or the believer in between afflictions. John Brown writes,

It is of great importance, if we would remain faithful in times of trial, that we habitually keep in mind the worst evils we can be exposed to. This will preserve us from being shaken or surprised by the less evils which may befall us, and make us feel that, instead of murmuring that the burden laid on us is so heavy, we have reason to be thankful that it is not heavier.¹⁶

This is a statement worthy of meditation; it seems to speak truth, but not completely. On the one hand, we can probably always imagine difficulties

¹⁴ Delitzsch; 310.

¹⁵ This is not to say that Christians are forbidden to harm or kill in the context of self-defense or military/police responsibilities. The context here is that opposition that comes against the believer, and believers together, on account of their testimony of Christ.

¹⁶ Brown; 619.

greater than what we may be encountering at any given time. But on the other hand, it must be said that each and every believer may at some time be called to affliction so extreme that no harder trial *can* be imagined. For example, in the affliction experienced by most Christians in the modern western world, the believer can contemplate the struggles faced by his ancient brethren in the Coliseum against the wild animals, or tied to the Marian stake and set afire. But what might those who suffered those evils think to? Well, the answer is right here in the passage: they thought to Christ, as we must always do, too. They considered the One who beyond all controversy did not deserve the least hostility against himself, especially from His own creation, Man.

So it is helpful, as Brown intimates, to consider in all afflictions that things could be worse. But it is more helpful, as the writer of Hebrews states, to consider that regardless of the intensity of the *agony* - the struggle - that comes against us, it cannot compare to the hostility endured by the sinless Son of God. The Holy Spirit does not intend here to give us a mantra for use in times of affliction: "It could be worse." Rather what is contained here is an admonition to make proper use of the relative calm between (or before) storms. The believer is to undergo the very same 'discipline' that readies the athlete for the next contest. The worst thing the believer can do is to grow complacent and overly fond of the lack of affliction in his life, for the danger of falling away is greatest not during times of persecution, but during times of persecution that follow hard upon times of moral and spiritual complacency. "They have now secured themselves against [persecution's] utmost violence by a sinful conformity to the faithless world around them, and are living in a condition dangerously near to that of apostasy. They are refusing or fleeing from the cross, and seem quite to have forgotten that the afflictions which God sends to His people are disciplines of love."¹⁷ This is where the Hebrew Christians were, or at least were in grave

¹⁷ Delitzsch; 310.

danger of being, found; and it must be said to be true of a great many professing believers today.

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;

For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” (12:5-6)

The quote here is from Proverbs 2, verses 11 & 12, and are taken fairly exactly from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Taking his queue from the Wisdom writer, the author of Hebrews shift from the terminology of the games to that of the home, though the whole pericope is still within the same context of struggle. Now we are in the relative calm where opposition is mild compared to the persecutions mentioned in the previous chapter. During this time, however, the somewhat lessened afflictions of opposition to one’s faith are to be viewed in a certain, biblical light: they are the *chastening* and *scourging* properly and lovingly administered by a father to his son.

The English words *chasten* and *scourge* are harsh to the modern ear, especially as corporal discipline of children has fallen into such disrepute among so many all-wise (and perhaps childless?) psychologists and educators. The first word translates the Greek word *paideiō*, the root of which gives us such English words as *pediatrics*. It literally means ‘to train children,’ and implies the very experiential, hands-on type of education that was prominent in the ancient world, and is still so in many underdeveloped parts of the world today. *Paideion* is “a fatherly discipline or process of education, reproof, such as makes us conscious of our faults and errors, and so promotes our moral improvement.”¹⁸ It involved instruction and encouragement, but also correction and reproof. It is a regimen suited to accentuate the child’s strengths, strengthen the child’s

¹⁸ Delitzsch; 312.

weaknesses, and remove the child's faults of character. Really, it should still be the goal of all childhood education.

The second word is, unfortunately, just as harsh as the English word 'scourge' conveys. The word is most commonly used in reference to the 'forty lashes minus one' that was the standard non-capital punishment in the ancient world. It implies a good, old-fashioned whipping, and reinforces the biblical view that corporal punishment is necessary in the proper raising of children. Indeed, there are several places where *paideō* – instruction & reproof – is linked with this scourging. Perhaps most familiar is the passage in Proverbs 13, most apposite to the current context,

*He who spares his rod hates his son,
But he who loves him disciplines him promptly. (Proverbs 13:24)*

Believers are not inherently inclined to understand affliction and persecution as manifestations of divine love, but that is exactly what the author is saying here. And the tendency to mistake affliction for divine displeasure is not merely a modern phenomenon; the Hebrew Christians of the first century were in danger of making the same mistake. But it is most certainly true that a false presentation of the Christian life can exacerbate this problem: the erroneous expectation fostered by so much modern evangelism, that the Christian life is a journey from victory and blessing to victory and blessing, leaves no room in the poor, misbegotten Christian for understanding affliction in any other way. And so the corrupt mental image that fallen man already has – that divine wrath immediately attends human sin – is coupled with a false expectation of ease and comfort as indications of divine favor. Thus if something 'goes wrong,' then God must be upset with you. The argument is truly ancient: it is the same one used by Job's three friends to explain his afflictions (of which, by the way, it is hard to imagine much worse).

It must be admitted that there is a certain *a priori* logic to the cause-and-effect relationships of favor and blessing, anger and affliction. But that is just the reason such passages as Proverbs 3:11-12 and Hebrews 12 are given to us; to train our minds to understand affliction from God's perspective. "Afflictions, which, when considered by themselves, may be considered as a temptation to apostasy, when viewed in the light of God's word, will be found to be an argument to steadfastness."¹⁹

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (12:7-8)

As has been his style, the author of Hebrews withdraws somewhat from the harshness of his words – he no longer refers to the *scourging* of verse 6 – without retreating even one step from the intensity of his message. Here the cadence echoes with the word *paideiav...paideuei...paideias* – a harmonious trio of forms of the same word, lost in our English *discipline...discipline...discipline*. But the underlying message is not lost, nor diminished for the lack of meter. The undisciplined child is not a son at all. "Afflictions are so far from being proofs that those who are visited with them are object of the divine displeasure, that an entire freedom from them would be a ground of doubt whether the individual was an object of the divine peculiar favour."²⁰

Suffering affliction, rejection, or persecution is not proof that someone is a believer, even if it comes against an individual on account of their profession of Christianity. "Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward." (Job 5:7) Brown wisely writes,

We cannot conclude that when we meet with affliction, therefore we are the children of God – the objects of His peculiar favour; for affliction is the common

¹⁹ Brown; 621.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; 622.

lot of man; in that respect, one event happens to the righteous and the wicked; - but neither can we conclude that we are His enemies, the objects of His judicial displeasure.²¹

We do not seek out persecution as some sort of badge of honor; proof that the Father loves us. Rather, we endure afflictions without wavering in faith or doubting the Father's love on account of them. Afflictions on account of the word of our testimony do not validate our faith; it is our patient and consistent adherence to that testimony, *in the midst of afflictions*, that validates our faith. Or perhaps we may put it more simply: afflictions do not validate one's faith, but one's faith will consecrate one's afflictions.

It is hard to overstate the importance of what the author, and the Holy Spirit, is saying to both the Hebrew Christians and to modern Christians with respect to the affliction and rejection we ought to experience in the world.

You have forgotten the admonition spoken to you as to sons (verse 5)

The Lord disciplines & scourges the son whom He loves (verse 6)

If a son, then an object of fatherly discipline (verse 7)

If undisciplined, then not a son at all. (verse 8)

Selah

²¹ Brown; 623.

Week 3: A Christian View of Affliction**Text Reading: Hebrews 12:9 - 13**

*"If but the mockery of chastisement were given,
the child would be hardened in sin,
and even despise the authority which it ought to respect."
(Charles H. Spurgeon)*

"But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.'" This quote, from the midst of the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, presents an intriguing and challenging perspective on sufferings and affliction. On the face of it, the comfort that poor Lazarus was receiving in Abraham's Bosom was the direct result of the sufferings that he endured during his earthly life. Conversely, the torment that afflicted the Rich Man answered to the serenity and prosperity of his life in the body. There appears to be a cause & effect relationship, therefore, between Lazarus' afflictions in this life and his bliss in the next, and between Dives' prosperity in this life and his torment in the next. This is not a mere academic question, either, for there have been many within the Church who have taught the same causal link between physical suffering and eternal salvation.

Even the author of Hebrews presents a stark comparison between those who bear up under affliction, persevering in their faith unto the end, and those who do not. Of the latter God says, *"My soul has no pleasure in them"* and *"They shall not enter My rest."* It is not unreasonable for one to assume that perseverance is the *cause* of one's salvation, in the same sense that endurance is the cause of a runner's victory in the race. This whole line of argument is of the same nature as the perennial struggle with the Epistle of James, and the relationship between faith and works. When one encounters, therefore, passages in Hebrews or James that seem to teach an internal effort as the cause of one's

salvation, it is important that they be approached from a solid doctrine of sin and salvation.

Charles H. Spurgeon dealt with this issue in the introductory portion of his sermon on Hebrews 12:11. In this he makes the important and necessary distinction between the *guilt* of sin and the *power* of sin. “If you separate between sanctification and justification, and make a clear distinction between the indwelling power of sin and the guilt of it, you may clearly perceive the place which affliction holds.”²² Spurgeon’s sermon is an excellent treatise on the place affliction holds not only in the life of the believer, but in the life of every man. He wisely points out that what the author of Hebrews says about the effects of affliction to the



Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-92)

believer who perseveres under it, has no causal connection with the regenerative grace that first made that person a believer. This fact of Scripture helps us to differentiate between afflictions which are the common lot of all mankind, and those that offer sanctifying purgation to the believer only.

There is nothing in the affliction itself, says Spurgeon, containing any inherent sanctifying properties. Struggles and disappointments, set-backs and opposition, do not in-and-of-themselves improve the character of any man, be he Christian or not. Indeed, knowing as we do the depravity of man through sin, it should not surprise us to discover that affliction most often causes bitterness and rebellion on the part of the afflicted. “The affliction does not do us any good in itself; the natural fruit of affliction is rebellion.”²³ Therefore, when the believer meditates on the writings of Hebrews 12, and contemplates the afflictions he or she may currently be suffering for the name of Christ, there must be the understanding that the affliction itself is devoid of sanctifying power. It is the

²² Spurgeon, Charles Hadden; *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*; Volume 9; 493-4.

²³ *Ibid*; 499.

Holy Spirit who purifies and molds the regenerate character of the child of God through affliction, as a fire purifies gold. "Affliction only makes the sin rise to the surface, it makes the devil in us come up; it makes us, while we are boiling in affliction, worse than we were before; it is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, and of our blessed Lord and Master, when he sees it on the top, then to skim it off."²⁴

All men suffer affliction; and all believers are promised persecution in this world. But not all men, believer or unbeliever, profit from affliction. In large measure the result of times of struggle come from one's perspective on the nature of affliction and on the ultimate gain to be had through endurance. Hence the metaphor used here of the runner, or of the boxer: athletes must perceive the benefits that will be gained through perseverance, and they must value those benefits more highly than their comfort and ease. But because affliction is the common lot of mankind, all religions and all philosophies must take it into account, and must offer their adherents some vantage point from which to understand and perhaps profit by the struggles they invariably encounter in life.

As an example, Buddhism reduces all of life's struggles, and all of life's



Marcus Aurelius (121-180)

joys, to the status of *illusion*: not of it is real, to the Buddhist. But if both good and bad are illusions, and there is no real distinction between pleasure and pain, then how does one deal with the apparent fact that some experiences in life are more pleasant, and others more painful? It doesn't seem possible that a quasi-religious philosophy such as Buddhism will ever achieve a majority belief status in the world; life's pains and life's pleasures are just too real to most people to be

relegated to the realm of the illusory. The famous philosopher-emperor Marcus

²⁴ *Idem.*

Aurelius offers a more practical, and humorous (though not meant to be so), viewpoint on suffering. Writing in his *Meditations*, Marcus very pragmatically comments that the value of afflictions is directly proportional to the ability of the afflicted to bear up under,

Whatsoever doth happen unto thee, thou art naturally by thy natural constitution either able, or not able to bear. If thou beest able, be not offended, but bear it according to thy natural constitution, or as nature hath enabled thee. If thou beest not able, be not offended. For it will soon make an end of thee, and itself, (whatsoever it be) at the same time end with thee. But remember, that whatsoever by the strength of opinion, grounded upon a certain apprehension of both true profit and duty, thou canst conceive tolerable; that thou art able to bear that by thy natural constitution.

Thus afflictions are merely to be borne, if one has the ability to bear. There is no other resultant benefit to affliction than to prove to a man his ability to bear up under it. And the man who cannot bear up, perishes, and with him the affliction. Rather senseless, really. But the Holy Spirit leads us in a more profitable and comforting path, and teaches us the salutary results of perseverance under affliction by reminding us of the analogy of childhood discipline.

Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?

(12:9)

The author of Hebrews continues his comparison between familial discipline at the hands of a father, and spiritual discipline administered by 'the Father of spirits.' The argument is the common *conclusion a minori ad majus* - concluding from the lesser to the greater. If there were certain benefits from parental discipline - and no one reasonably doubts that there are - then how much more the benefits from disciplines administered by a perfect Father? A passage such as this one, however, loses much of its impact in a modern world that disparages childhood discipline as being cruel and dangerous. The author

of Hebrews wrote in a world and to an audience that could not doubt the necessity and the benefits of a father inflicting both discipline and punishment upon his child; disciplines and punishments that were often far harsher than anyone now living could imagine in their own past. But we live in an age 'enlightened' by Dr. Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician who convinced a nation that spanking a child was a sure way to condone and perpetuate violence within our society. There are several reasons to avoid physical punishment. It teaches children that the larger, stronger person has the power to get his way,



Dr. Benjamin Spock (1903-98)

whether or not he is in the right. In Spock's view, "Some spanked children then feel quite justified in beating up on smaller ones. The American tradition of spanking may be one reason there is much more violence in our country than in any other comparable nation."²⁵ Spock makes a great deal of spurious connections between familial discipline and societal violence, but his views have taken root in our society to the point that it is probably not a good idea for a parent to spank their child in public. They may get a visit from a social worker the next day.

This is an example, however, of how Scripture can be 'enculturated' out of its original and eternal meaning. If punishing a child is bad, then a good father should never spank his son. Since spanking 'proves' the doctrine of might makes right in the mind of the child, parental discipline should be limited to reasoning with the child that he might see the error of his way, and the benefit of the 'right' way. But then we come to a biblical passage (and one of many, we are reminded) that not only speaks approvingly of parental discipline, but moves from that temporal and physical discipline to the analogous role of affliction from the hand of the heavenly Father. Applying Spock (and, unfortunately, not the logical Spock from Star Trek) to Scripture, we arrive at the modern, liberal

²⁵ Spock, Dr. Benjamin; *Baby & Child Care*; 1998; 437-38).

view that God never uses affliction, but only blessings and rational persuasion, upon men. Culture again trumps Scripture, and the meaning of the Word is eviscerated.

But the Spirit answers in verse 9, *“how much more...”* It was right for the son to submit himself to the discipline of his father. It was evidence of wisdom for that child to understand that such discipline was producing in himself strong character (and not a propensity toward violence), and therefore the unpleasant discipline was to be received with patience and endurance. *How much more* should the child of God also submit to the administration of discipline from his Father in heaven? *How much more* character, *how much more* moral integrity, *how much more* separation from the temporary pleasures of sin, will that affliction effectuate in the mind and soul of the believer who humbly submits and perseveres?

The author interestingly refers to God as *“the Father of spirits.”* This may be a continuation of the contrast between the ‘fathers of our flesh’ and the Father who gave birth to our regenerate spirits. It may also be an allusion to a similar designation given to the Lord in the Book of Numbers,

*Then they fell on their faces, and said, “O God, the **God of the spirits of all flesh**, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?”* (Num. 16:22)

*Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying: “Let the LORD, the **God of the spirits of all flesh**, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd.”* (Num. 22:15-17)

Some commentators find in this reference the doctrine of Creationism, which teaches that every single human spirit is created by God at the same time the body is conceived in the mother’s womb. This doctrine is contrasted with Traducianism, which teaches that the soul/spirit of every human being is the product of procreation between the human mother and human father. Both have

merit, and neither have anything to do with what the author of Hebrews is saying. It is far better to adhere to the simple interpretation: he is contrasting our earthly fathers, who disciplined us in our flesh that we might be better men in this life, with our heavenly Father, who disciplines us with a view toward eternal glory.

For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. (12:10)

This simpler view is reinforced by the very next verse, where the temporary duration of parental discipline is highlighted. Two qualifiers are placed on the form of discipline we received from our earthly fathers: *for a few days* and *as seemed best to them*. Continuing his contrast between parental chastisement and divine discipline, the writer circumscribes the duration, motivation, and effectiveness of the former in order to more clearly emphasize the perfection of the latter. He is no advocate of the infallibility of the parent; rather he acknowledges that the ‘father of our flesh’ disciplines us, really, no better than his own understanding permits. And often worse.

“There are many parents who, in inflicting chastisement, are guided just by the impulse of the moment, and have no direct inference to the ultimate welfare of the child...more influenced by natural irritation than by a reasonable wish to do his child good.”²⁶ If this statement were not true, and too often manifested in human history, then Dr. Spock’s viewpoint would never had gained an audience. We all recognize the errors made by our parents in their discipline; and hopefully recognize our own errors in the discipline of our children. That does not, of course, negate the value of discipline (though it does offer a tangential reproof to parents with regard to their handling of the raising of their children!) One should not, however, read ‘child abuse’ into child discipline. Rather the intent is to show the far greater effects of the same concept

²⁶ Brown; *Epistle to the Hebrews*; 627-28.

- discipline - when administered by a perfect Father whose sole motivation for such affliction is the spiritual perfection of His child. The author "is not contrasting good and bad modes of training, but that which is human, and at the best affected by human infirmity, with that which is divine, and therefore perfect."²⁷

Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (12:11)

This verse is perhaps another piece of evidence that the original form of the whole 'book' was spoken. The author merges the two analogous streams of discipline - parental and divine - in the first clause, "*no chastising is joyful...*" but then shifts entirely to the second type of discipline in the final clause, "*but afterward it yields...*" The first is a general statement that applies to discipline, affliction, chastisement, exercise, - any restriction upon our ease and comfort in life: For the time being, it is not joyful. When applied to parental discipline, assuming it is administered with proper motive and intent, this statement goes along with the humorous quip: "This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me." Spurgeon writes, "If but the mockery of chastisement were given, the child would be hardened in sin, and even despise the authority which it ought to respect."²⁸

There is no insidious meaning to the word 'seem' here in verse 11, as if chastisement only *seems* to be unpleasant. The sense is a prospective look at retrospection (think about that for a moment). The reader is, in the first clause, referred back to times of chastisement, of affliction. They did not seem joyful, because they were not joyful. But even with (good) parental discipline, a retrospective view lessens the memory of the pain on account of the awareness of

²⁷ Delitzsch; 322.

²⁸ Spurgeon; *op cit.*; 496.

the consequent benefit. The *outcome* was good; so the *chastisement itself* was not so bad.

Now the believer is asked to look *forward* to that retrospective view while yet in the midst of affliction; indeed, perhaps the very beginning of affliction and before the heat is really turned up. Consider with respect to your current situation what you already know to be true with respect to past disciplining. Give thought in the midst of affliction, to the potential outcome if God's hand be in it: *the peaceful fruit of righteousness*.

Two caveats are involved here before we may lay claim to the rewards of affliction. First, as just stated, God's hand must be in it. Self-inflicted suffering is not sanctifying,

For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. (I Peter 2:19-21)

This is not to say that God is not sovereign over all that happens to us; He is, thank God. It is merely to differentiate between the type of affliction that contains the purgative power of weaning a believer from the love of this world, and that sort of affliction that mankind brings upon himself on account of his own sin. It is true, to be sure, that even the latter kind of affliction can bear fruit, but only if the 'victim' comes to the realization that he brought it on himself. This was the psalmist David's experience, though it is sadly not the norm.

*When I kept silent, my bones grew old
Through my groaning all the day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah
I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I have not hidden.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah* (Psalm 32:3-5)

The second caveat has also to do with the one who suffers the chastisement: he must *be trained by it*. It must constantly be kept in mind that there is no inherent power within affliction to bring about a change in any man, believer or unbeliever. The only power that can utilize the unpleasant and chaotic phenomenon of affliction to produce "*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*" is that of the indwelling Holy Spirit. But even this is not, as we might wish it to be, an automatic transmutation. The believer, in a sense, has a definite role to play in the whole scene if the results are to be a movement in the direction of righteousness. Perhaps the most important aspect of this role is for the believer to realize that the *natural* response to affliction is bitterness. It is of vital importance that the pit be avoided, if the narrow path is to be followed.

John Owen furnishes a helpful list of things that a believer may and should find taking place within himself during times of affliction. It is a sort of '12-Step' approach to Christian Affliction, except there are only six steps. In the midst of suffering, the believer should seek to develop,

1. An *acquiescency* in God's right and sovereignty to do what he will with his own,
2. An *acknowledgement* of His righteousness and wisdom in all His dealings with us,
3. A *sense of His care and love*, with a due apprehension of the end of His chastisements,
4. A *diligent application* of ourselves unto His mind and will,
5. In *keeping our souls by faith* and patience from weariness and despondence,
6. In a full *resignation of ourselves* unto His will, as the matter, manner, times, and continuance of our affliction.²⁹

With these two caveats in place - that the affliction not be self-inflicted, and that the believer be engaged to profit thereby to the best of his ability and God's grace - it is possible to exercise that prospective retrospection, and to see the outcome of divine discipline in spite of the unpleasantness of its experience. "The false appearance of misfortune and unhappiness is removed by a look to

²⁹ Owen, John; *Hebrews Volume 7*; 271.

the end of this providential discipline, and from that end a conclusion may be drawn as to the motive of love in which it originates."³⁰

Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. (12:12-13)

There is an echo of the voice of the prophet Isaiah in this whole section of Hebrews (as there is in the whole of the New Testament). In Isaiah's prophecy there was promised tremendous affliction, and much of it due to the sin of the people themselves. But in the same prophecy the Lord speaks words of comfort to those who persevere in their faith, and who do not abandon the love of Jehovah even in the midst of affliction. One such passage seems to undergird verse 11 of Hebrews 12,

*Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
And righteousness remain in the fruitful field.
The work of righteousness will be peace,
And the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever.
My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation,
In secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places,
Though hail comes down on the forest,
And the city is brought low in humiliation.* (Isaiah 32:16-19)

And another that was clearly on the mind of our author when he penned verse 12,

*Strengthen the weak hands,
And make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are fearful-hearted,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Behold, your God will come with vengeance,
With the recompense of God; He will come and save you."* (Isaiah 35:3-4)

The author maintains his metaphor of the race and of the boxing ring, exhorting his hearers to "run the race with endurance" and to "fight the good fight"

³⁰ Delitzsch; 323.

to the final bell. Some commentators take the admonition of verses 12 & 13 to be personal, and they very well may be taken that way. But the language, and the allusion to the same wording in Isaiah, makes it impossible to escape the *corporate* implication of the words. Certainly we are to strengthen our own weak hands and feeble knees, but it is often the affliction of those with weak hands and feeble knees, that they are incapable of remedying the problem alone.

Delitzsch compares the Hebrew Christians with those Israelites who were “*halting between two opinions*” in the days of Elijah: between serving Jehovah or serving Baal.

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people answered him not a word. (I Kings 18:21)

The reference is appropriate, though it may not have been on the writer’s mind at the time. Israel was in the process of apostasy, but not yet fully gone. So it was with the Hebrew Christians to whom the author writes. It may seem jarring to put the Mosaic religion in the place of Baal, but the stark reality of the situation was that a return to Moses constituted an abandonment of God: in a word, apostasy. It is not the first time in this epistle that the author has given such an exhortation concerning the ‘one anothers’ of the Hebrew congregation. In Chapter 10, also beginning the admonition with a “*therefore,*” he writes,

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, 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, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **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.* (Hebrews 10:19-25)

Week 4: Pursue Peace & Holiness

Text Reading: Hebrews 12:14 - 17

*"In general, men do not perish alone in their iniquity; they infect others, and embolden them to transgress."
(James Haldane)*

The author is coming to the conclusion of his sustained exhortation to perseverance. One more relatively calm admonition here in verses 14-17, and then a climactic crescendo to end Chapter 12. If what we call the *Epistle* to the Hebrews was, in fact, originally a sermon, then it seems very likely that the closing words of that oration are the closing words of this current chapter, "...for our God is a consuming fire." We are building to that point, and the writer/preacher has but one more earnest plea for endurance on the part of the Hebrew Christians – with one more illustration from the history of the Old Covenant people.

In this last section of the exhortative portion of the book (if we consider Chapter 13 to be an appended epilogue to the work, added when it was sent as a letter), we can almost perceive the curtain closing on divine grace, the door of salvation creaking on its hinges as it moves to bar the way of entry forever. The Hebrew congregation is in grave danger, and there are members of that assembly who are false professors – roots of wormwood that may defile the whole harvest. The parable of the Ten Virgins speaks the same language as the author of Hebrews here. There is not an unlimited amount of time available for the Hebrew Christians to set themselves to persevere in the race, to strengthen the weak hands and the feeble knees, to commit themselves to endurance. "The same truth is inculcated in the parable of the ten virgins. Five were excluded;

they besought that the door might be opened; but it was too late. The door was shut.”³¹

It is apparent from the language used in these verses that the author, while never doubting the omnipotence of God in the preservation of His true children, has serious concerns that the disease of apostasy has already infiltrated the congregation. He draws a line from Moses’ final renewal of the covenant with the children of Israel, prior to their crossing into the Promised Land,

I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, but with him who stands here with us today before the LORD our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today (for you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we came through the nations which you passed by, and you saw their abominations and their idols which were among them – wood and stone and silver and gold); so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations, and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart’ – as though the drunkard could be included with the sober.

(Deuteronomy 29:14-19)

The danger facing ancient Israel only seemed to be the inhabitants of Canaan, against whom they would soon array in battle. The real danger, however, was within Israel itself – apostasy and idolatry in the congregation was of greater harm to the covenant people than their opponents in the world. It has ever been so for the people of God. The ‘Fifth Column,’ as it were – a evil, unbelieving heart ready to capitalize on the congregation’s fear from within, and the persecution from unbelievers without – to completely overthrow the faith of the assembly. The author of Hebrews calls the entire congregation to watchfulness against this ultimate threat to their attaining the prize that awaits them at the end of the race. Contrary to many in our own day who preach and teach that perseverance is optional, the biblical truth is that perseverance is the

³¹ Haldane, James A. *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press; 2002); 375.

only confidence one has that a true regenerative work has been done within one's heart. "Indeed, while we may be confident that He who hath begun a good work will carry it on to the day of Christ, and that the election shall obtain eternal life, we can only know that we are the subjects of Divine grace by holding fast the truth as it is in Jesus, and abiding in the doctrine of Christ."³²

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; (12:14)

The translations of New King James version provides a bit of interpretation in the rendering of verse 14. In the original Greek the phrase is choppy, more succinct; but it also contains an important element left out of the NKJV. As to the subjects of peace, most English versions provide a word that is missing in the original. Literally the first clause of the verse reads, "*Pursue peace with all...*" without any referent to the word 'all.' So the NKJV adds 'people,' the NASB provides 'men,' and the NIV simply says, "*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone.*" Generally, however, there is the assumption that the author is speaking of all and sundry – whether believers or unbelievers. While this is a true lesson of Scripture, there is reason to doubt that it is the meaning of this particular passage.

In favor of a more universal application of the term 'all' in verse 14 are several parallel thoughts in the Pauline corpus of writings. Chief among these is Romans 12:17-19,

*Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. **If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.** Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*

Later in the same epistle Paul gives a similar admonition, but clearly circumscribes it within the community of believers,

³² Haldane; 371.

Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Romans 14: 19)

The two thoughts – of peace with all men, and of peace within the congregations, are combined along a different line in Paul’s letter to the Galatians,

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:9-10)

Thus we have biblical evidence that believers are to seek peace with all men regardless of their affiliation with Christianity, but also with a particular emphasis on the peace of the Body of Christ, the Church. The question in every case is to determine, from the context, which ‘peace’ the writer is referring to. In the case of Hebrews 12:14 the overall thrust leans the interpretation to the more specific application of the body, rather than to the world at large. The verse follows immediately after the exhortation to “*strengthen the feeble hands and the weak knees,*” and is followed by a stern warning to be on guard against that ‘root of bitterness’ within the congregation itself. Furthermore, the first part of the verse is coupled inextricably with the second, where the pursuit of holiness is enjoined upon the readers. ‘Peace and Holiness,’ joined together so closely, points strongly to the condition of the congregation rather than to that of the congregation with respect to the outside world.

But the hermeneutic evidence is not absolute, and one cannot rule out a broader application of the ‘all’ in verse 14. The Hebrew Christians were indeed facing a great deal of opposition from outsiders, who most likely were people of their own race, Jews, and quite possibly members of their own families. The temptation to respond in kind would have been great, but to do so would have sullied their testimony before the unbelievers, and probably would have intensified the opposition as well. Even in the best of times, there is the

temptation within any religion – and Christianity is not excepted – to treat unbelievers with contempt and manifest unkindness. “Some who have aimed at holiness have made the great mistake of supposing it needful to be morose, contentious, faultfinding, and censorious with everybody else.”³³ One of the most famous examples of this tendency was not a Christian at all (it would have been an anachronism, since he lived prior to the birth of Christ): Cato the Younger of ancient Rome. Cato lived from 95 – 46 AD and was thus a younger contemporary of the more famous Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. He was the scion of a famous and powerful family, and was so devoted to Stoic philosophy that he was difficult even for his own kin to tolerate. For he tolerated no one himself. Plutarch writes of Cato,

We are told that from his very childhood Cato displayed, in speech, countenance, and in his childish sports, a nature that was inflexible, imperturbable, and altogether steadfast. He set out to accomplish his purposes with a vigour beyond his years, and while he was harsh and repellent to those who would flatter him, he was still more masterful towards those who tried to frighten him. It was altogether difficult to make him laugh, although once in a while he relaxed his features so far as to smile; and he was not quickly nor easily moved to anger, though once angered he was inexorable.³⁴

Sadly, many Christians over the centuries have found too much to like in the tenets of Stoicism, and too much to applaud in the singular disagreeableness of men like Cato. “A Christian man should not make himself hated by all around him yet there are some who seem to fancy that they are true to their religion in proportion as they make themselves disagreeable.”³⁵ This, to be sure, represents an extreme position found among believers – that of a settled hostility toward the world that manifests itself in constant unpleasantness. Extreme, maybe; but nonetheless it ought not be named within the Church of Jesus Christ.

³³ Spurgeon, Charles H. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit; Volume 16* (1870); 386.

³⁴ Plutarch's Lives; *The Life of Cato the Younger*;

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Cato_Minor*.html

³⁵ Spurgeon; *op cit.*; 387.

On the other extreme, however, there is a fault equally to be avoided: that of obsequiousness. If the pursuit of peace in verse 14 does apply to 'all men' regardless of faith, then the pursuit of holiness in the same verse precludes an uncritical, unmeasured, and unbalanced peacefulness with the unbelieving world. The "*inasmuch as it depends upon you*" of Romans 12:17 does not refer to our personalities - to be at peace just so long as our own temperament allows. Rather it speaks to holiness, to the doctrines of grace and of Christ, to the foundation of faith - things that cannot be sacrificed on any account. True peace can never be purchased at such a cost.

If, in consistency with this (i.e., holiness), we can live in peace with all men, it is so much the better; but if peace with men cannot be purchased but at the expense of devotedness to God, then we must - we must willingly - submit to the inconveniences arising from having men to be our enemies, knowing that it is infinitely better to have the whole world for our enemies and God for our friend, than to have the whole world for our friends and God for our enemy.³⁶

Thus if we do take the first clause of verse 14 in as universal a scope as possible, we are thereby taught to be of a friendly, agreeable, yet unyielding disposition toward the unbelieving world. This is a truth well attested by Scripture; but the language of Hebrews 12, and particularly verse 14, seem to narrow our focus to within the congregation itself. The very word that begins the verse, the imperative '*pursue*,' is just too strong to be capable of application outside the realm of people among whom true peace can reasonably be expected. The word is not the usual Greek word for 'seek,' but rather a much stronger word that is, in different context to be sure, also translated *persecute*. It is the term of the hunter who pursues his prey with aggression and diligence, single-mindedness of purpose that endures all hardships in order to attain the prey. The vigor implied by this verb is illustrated in the negative by the behavior of Saul of Tarsus, who by his own admission before the Jews, said,

³⁶ Brown, John; *Epistle to the Hebrews*; 638.

*I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I **persecuted** this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.*

(Acts 22:3-5)

The sense of the word is too strong to be applied to all men without regard to their faith, for we just simply are not commanded to pursue peace with the ungodly with this same degree of vigor. "We are to follow after peace because God is the God of peace, enjoying the infinite manifoldness of His divine plenitude in a Sabbath-like *peace*, of which the rainbow with its 'oneness in the manifold' is the expressive symbol. The church must endeavor all she can to reproduce in herself the image of that divine calm in particular, and of the diving holiness in general, which is itself the absolute unclouded light, and the absolute all-embracing, all-reconciling love."³⁷

To this whole-hearted chase after peace, the target of holiness is added by the author of Hebrews. Interestingly he uses the article in front of the second noun, but not before the first. In other words, and as the NASB translates the verse, we are to *pursue peace...and **the** holiness...*, indicating a specific meaning of the word *hagiasmon* – holiness or sanctification. The author himself qualifies of just what 'holiness' he speaks, "*without which no one shall see the Lord.*" This phrase indicates a more fundamental holiness than the progressive sanctification of a maturing faith; it is that union with Christ by virtue of which the sinner is made a 'saint' – literally, a 'holy one.' Within the context of the whole letter to the Hebrews – a consistent and thorough warning against apostasy – it would seem that both the 'peace' and the 'holiness' have particular reference to a steadfast adherence on the part of the believer to the name and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. "If 'peace' binds the community together as the achievement

³⁷ Delitzsch; 329.

of Christ, 'holiness' is that quality which identifies the community as the possession of Christ."³⁸

This final clause in verse 14 foreshadows the climax of the sermon's closing passage, Hebrews 12:18-29. Perhaps the Hebrew congregation was being seduced by their brethren according to the flesh, that the way to Jehovah was through the Law and through Moses, as the ancients taught. Perhaps they were tempted to believe, as so many do today, that it was too constraining of the love of God to limit the ways to heaven to just one. Maybe we could just stand Jesus up within the pantheon of Old Testament worthies, right up next to Moses even, and that would be enough to satisfy God. The writer cuts through all such nonsense with the razor sharp knife of the Word, "*without which no one will see the Lord.*" The issue is not the Law, or the Prophets, or any other theological or doctrinal matter – the issue is *holiness*, for the Lord's eyes are too pure even to look upon evil (Habakkuk 1:13) and only the man with clean hands and a pure heart can ascend the holy hill and stand in the presence of the Lord. "Only holy beings can rise to the sight of the Holy One."³⁹ And no man is holy outside of Christ.

... looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled... (12:15)

The only verb in this passage is the one with which verse 14 opens, the imperative *pursue*. In these next verses we have a series of participial phrases that further explain just how this pursuit is to be undertaken. The first of these is an interesting one, for it employs the traditional verb that describes the function of the pastors of the flock *episkopountes* – 'overseeing.' "The present active participle *episkopountes*, 'watching continually,' derives its function and imperatival force from the main verb, the present imperative *diōkete*, 'pursue.'"⁴⁰

³⁸ Lane, William L.; *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13*; 450.

³⁹ Delitzsch; 329.

⁴⁰ Lane; 451.

It is important that we allow the force of the command, *pursue*, to color all that follows in this pericope, and to understand that the things we are exhorted to are part and parcel of that same aggressive going-after of peace and holiness.

Even though the participle in verse 15 normally is reserved for the office of elders in the church, it is clear that such a limitation is not called for in this verse. This is a 'one another' verse. "Now, the Hebrew Christians were to watch over each other, lest any of them should, by not following holiness, by not cultivating devotedness to God, fail of attaining that state of perfect holy happiness in the immediate presence of the Lord, which is the prize of our high calling."⁴¹ Lane adds, "The call to vigilance expressed in *episkopountes* refers not to some official expression of ministry but rather to the engagement of the community as a whole in the extension of mutual care."⁴² It is, once again, the Lord's consistent affirmative answer to that persistent question of Cain, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*"

Verse 15 is, frankly, one of those troublesome verses that seem to indicate the possibility of a believer losing his salvation, "*coming short of the grace of God.*" But the wording is a clear allusion to Deuteronomy 29:18, the second reading of the covenant by Moses in which he also exhorted the children of Israel to be on the lookout "*that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood.*" No one, even among the priests, Levites, and rabbis, ever supposed that every living descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a child of God. There were apostates in the wilderness, and apostates in the Promised Land. The analogy must be allowed to carry over to the Church of professing believers in Jesus Christ. That some may 'fall short' of the grace of God has the same meaning of those who fell short of Canaan – they perished ultimately because of unbelief. Within the Church, then, "*A root that beareth gall and wormwood,*' is just

⁴¹ Brown; 639.

⁴² Lane; 451-52.

another name for a secret apostate, a false-hearted professor of the true religion."⁴³

But the sternness of the warning must not be diluted by a complacent reliance upon a past profession of belief, or even upon continued association with believing people. All throughout this sermon, and certainly hear toward the end no less than before, it is *endurance* and *perseverance* that give solid evidence of saving faith. So long as a sinner is exposed to the steadfast faith of believers, so long is there hope of a regenerative work being done in his heart, even if he already professes to be a believer. But the sin of apostasy is a spreading weed, a root of wormwood capable of defiling the consciences of other false professors and driving them from the means of grace into final unbelief. As James Haldane put it, "In general, men do not perish alone in their iniquity; they infect others, and embolden them to transgress."⁴⁴

This is particularly true of apostasy. The doubter must secure himself in unbelief by convincing others of doubt, leading others away from faith. This is seen openly outside of the church, especially in societies once impacted by the Gospel - unbelief is a virulent contagion because it touches spiritual anti-bodies within fallen man ready to receive it and further its spread. For this reason every congregation - the leadership as well as the flock - must make every effort to "*stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*" (Phil. 1:27). The responsibility is upon all, not merely the elders, to superintend the whole flock, watching out particularly for unbelief - that is the root that will defile the harvest. The Church has never been in a condition, from the ascension of our Lord to this day, when this exhortation was not needed. Consider the apparent state of the Church in the 18th Century, that would call forth this comment by John Brown (1722-87),

⁴³ Brown; 639.

⁴⁴ Haldane; 372.

I am afraid that a great deal of that impurity of Christian communion which is one of the worst characters of the Christianity of our times, and produces such deplorable results in many ways, is to be traced to a neglect of this mutual superintendence. I do not mean to exculpate those who are officially overseers; but it must be obvious that all their attempts, however honest, to secure purity of communion will be of but little avail, if they are not seconded by the brotherly oversight of the members themselves.⁴⁵

...lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. (12:16)

Here is the final example from the Old Covenant people, and it is not a good one. Although the Scriptures themselves do not label Esau as a fornicator, traditional Jewish exegesis did, probably on account of his polygamy and the fact that his wives were from outside the covenant people. The word 'profane' does not mean that Esau cursed like a sailor, but rather that he was a man who held the covenant of Jehovah in contempt. Indeed, he is the poster child of all such men in the world. Delitzsch writes of Esau,

Esau, who was so profane, so low-minded, so utterly lost to a sense of higher things, that for one poor dish he gave up the rights of the first-born to a double portion of the inheritance of his father...For the inheritance and pastoral wealth of his father he cared not, being wildly devoted to the chase, and still less for the promise made to Abraham and Isaac, having no eye or heart but for the immediate present.⁴⁶

The secret apostate within the congregation is like Esau, content to live under the blessings of prosperity and of divine favor granted to Abraham's family through the covenant, but unwilling to exert any inconvenience or effort on behalf of that covenant. Esau was the quintessential man-of-the-world; but one yet willing to enjoy the benefits of association with the people of God, so long as it costs him nothing. But he will turn on the community of faith in a

⁴⁵ Brown; 642.

⁴⁶ Delitzsch; 334.

moment, his fundamental unbelief becoming manifest as soon as more is required of him than mere enjoyment of life. "Esau thus typifies the godless person who relinquishes the rights conferred upon him by the covenant for the sake of momentary relief. He is 'the prototype of all who throw away the heavenly reality for the sake of the earthly one.'"⁴⁷

Who are such people today? Well, at the risk of offending Presbyterian readers, Esau was a 'child of the covenant' no less than was Jacob. He was not the product of sinful scheming, as Ishmael was, but was the legitimate son of the covenant heir, Isaac. His pedigree was as strong and pure as Jacob's. Thus we may number among potential Esaus in today's church those who are born into believing families, who are raised under the teaching of Scripture and the preaching of the Gospel, who benefit from the fellowship faith, but who never come to make that faith their own. Perhaps the greatest error inherent in the practice of 'covenant baptism' of infants, is the loss of that circumspection over the development of that 'covenant child' as he or she grows to maturity. The *episkopountes* - mutual oversight within the congregation - is in danger of being neglected when any confidence is placed on familial connection. Salvation is not genetic, though there has always been great cause for believers to hope in the election of their children. Nonetheless, constant vigilance ought to be exercised especially in the case of the children of believers - as Esau was.

For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. (12:17)

This verse is on the list of tough passages of the Bible, especially as it appears to say that Esau tried to repent but was prevented. The historical narrative is, of course, from Genesis and is familiar to most. But it would not hurt to revisit the text and discern the heart of this wayward son of the covenant.

⁴⁷ Lane; 455.

*Now it happened, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. He also had made savory food, and brought it to his father, and said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that your soul may bless me." And his father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" So he said, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." Then Isaac trembled exceedingly, and said, "Who? Where is the one who hunted game and brought it to me? I ate all of it before you came, and I have blessed him – and indeed he shall be blessed." **When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me – me also, O my father!"** But he said, "Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing." And Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? **For he has supplanted me these two times.** He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!" And he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"*

(Genesis 27:30-36)

What was the nature of Esau's repentance? It is obvious that he regretted the loss of the blessing and, undoubtedly, the inheritance that was entailed within it. But he had already forfeited his birthright, and with that his entitlement to the double-portion of the firstborn. Jacob was merely protecting his own 'property,' as it were, since Esau sold him the birthright years before. But Jacob had throughout shown his interest in the covenant made between Jehovah and his grandfather Abraham, and his father Isaac. For this Esau cared not a wit. The tears of Esau were for his earthly loss, not for the spiritual vacuum in his heart. "Those tears expressed, indeed, sorrow for his forfeiture, but not for the sinful levity by which it had been incurred."⁴⁸ This was not the 'godly sorrow that leads to repentance' of which Paul speaks; this was, at best, no more than profound regret.

This is the final condition of an apostate – when the boom is lowered, and the full cost of unbelief is made manifest, the progressive heart-hardening of that unbelief has rendered true repentance impossible. In this verse "it is intimated that he who, Esau-like, throws these (i.e., covenant blessings) away for the sake of worldly ease, or even sensual indulgence, will find with sorrow and remorse

⁴⁸ Delitzsch; 337.

in the end, that he has lost the blessing he once had a claim to, however earnestly he may now desire it, and that the door of repentance is closed upon him.”⁴⁹

This is a tough pill for the modern Arminian to swallow, with his mistaken belief that repentance is within the fallen man to accomplish. Man can no more repent than he can believe, for both are the products of conversion, and conversion is the work of God alone. Let no one fool himself that he will repent before it is too late, that he will ‘eat, drink, and be merry’ but repent before he dies. *“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, that will he reap.”* That is the lesson of Esau.

⁴⁹ Delitzsch; 337.

Week 5: Sinai & Sion: A Tale of Two Covenants**Text Reading: Hebrews 12:18 - 24**

*"How wise it is to seek security from the terrors of Sinai
in the peace and serenity of Sion!"*
(John Brown)

The passage before us in this lesson is one of the most beautiful and profound in all of Scripture. It is the author's finale in which the whole of his argument up to this point is caught up in one final exhilarating crescendo and the Old Covenant is once more contrasted with the New. The passage is poetic, even musical, with a cadence in the original Greek that is not entirely lost in translation to English. So composite is the whole, that it is almost a shame to exegete the individual verses; perhaps not even 'almost.' It is composed in two parts, both set off by a liturgical term of worship – the 'coming' of God's people before Him in the tabernacle or the Temple. Verse 18 thus begins with the negation, "*you have not come...*" and verse 22 sets the positive note, "*you have come...*" The two verbs are identical in all respects; there would have been no doubt in the minds of the original audience that this brief song represented the culmination of the author's skillful comparison of the Old Covenant with the New.

The structure of the passage is further accentuated by the parallel list of seven characteristics: *seven* for the first stanza, and *seven* for the second. Each of the seven in each list is set apart by the Greek *kai*, 'and,' giving the whole that cadence mentioned above. The picture painted by the words in the first stanza admits of no uncertainty, even though the location itself is not specified. The author transports us in words to stand with the children of Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai. The scenery is vivid, and the impression intended is terror. The only hint of comfort in the first half of the song is the negative: "*you have not come...*" The awesome and terrifying scene then portrayed is not a portrait of the New

Covenant people. Rather it is an accurate and graphic reenactment of that very same Mosaic Covenant to which the Hebrew Christians were drawn in dangerous apostasy.

God was here represented in all the outward demonstrations of infinite holiness, justice, severity, and terrible majesty, on the one hand; and on the other, men in their lowest condition of sin, misery, guilt, and death.⁵⁰

The focus of attention is drawn, and should be drawn, to the second stanza of the song - to Mt. Zion (Sion) - and to the most panoramic and stunning portrait of the New Covenant to be found in the whole Bible. This is the vision that should appear in believer's minds when they contemplate the work of God in Christ Jesus - this is the Church, the Kingdom, the Bride, the Body of Christ, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

This is the state and order of this heavenly kingdom, - everything that belongs unto it is in its proper place and station: God at the head, as the framer, erector, and sovereign dispenser of it; Jesus, as the only means of all communications between God and the residue of the church; innumerable myriads of angels ministering unto God and men in this society; the spirits of just men at rest, and in the enjoyment of the reward of their obedience; all the faithful on earth in a Sion-state of liberty in their worship, and righteousness in their persons. This is the city of the living God, wherein he dwelleth, the heavenly Jerusalem.⁵¹

William Lane adds, "The sharp contrast, brilliantly drawn in rhythmic, measured phrases and balanced conceptions, exhibits the fundamental differences between the old and new covenants and between Moses and Jesus, respectively, as mediators of the encounter with God."⁵² Lane's comment regarding the 'balanced conceptions' alludes to the apparent parallelism between the first and second strophes - the first referring to Mt. Sinai and the Law, and the second referring to Mt. Zion and Grace. Most modern commentators make

⁵⁰ Owen; 307.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; 351.

⁵² Lane; 459.

note of the parallel 'sevens' in each section, but this hermeneutical feature does have its problems. First, it is of relatively late development. The 'discovery' of



J. A. Bengel (1687-1752)

seven concepts under Sinai compared and contrasted to seven concepts under Sion is widely credited to the biblical scholar John Albert Bengel, known as the 'Father of Modern Biblical Interpretation' for his exhaustive work from the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures. There does not appear to be any mention of 'parallel sevens' in earlier writings on the passage, thought that in itself may not negate Bengel's analysis. The second problem, however, is that biblical scholars from Bengel to this day have not been able to agree on just what comprises the two parallel sets of seven. Charles Spurgeon, for example, honors Bengel in the discovery of the parallel sevens, and then offers his own interpretation of what they are,

It may be that the idea of this sevenfold contrast first occurred to Bengel, that prince of critics, but I have ventured to differ from his form of it, and I hope that in so doing I have set forth the contrast as to the seven things more clearly than he has done, so that even the humblest here will catch each point, and retain each contrast in his memory.⁵³

It seems that the sevenfold parallelism of concepts between the first section (verses 18-21) and the second (verses 22-24) ought not to be pressed too hard. Delitzsch, whose commentary on Hebrews is masterful, also does homage to Bengel for the sevenfold parallelism, but ingeniously adds that the structure may have been subconscious to the original author! "We are convinced that this sevenfold division is a real and sound one, the product of correct feeling and tact on the part of the sacred writer, though it may be, with more less

⁵³ Spurgeon, Charles; *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 28* (1882); 626.

unconsciousness in his own mind."⁵⁴ But perhaps Spurgeon's interpretation has that merit of clarity and mnemonic aid that he claimed. In any event, here are his parallels for consideration.

The **first contrast** between *'the mount that may be touched'* and *'Mount Zion, the city of the living God,'* is without a doubt the clearest of the pairings and is found in all commentators since Bengel. Though the first location is not mentioned specifically, there can be no question that the author speaks of Sinai, where the phenomena he is about to describe historically accompanied the giving of the Law to Moses.

The **second contrast**, according to Spurgeon, lies between *'burns with fire'* and *'innumerable company of angels'* based on the latter being called, in Scripture and in this very epistle, *'ministers of fire.'*

The **third pairing** is between the *'blackness'* of Mt. Sinai on that dreadful day, and the *'general assembly and church of the firstborn.'* Spurgeon stretches for this one, contrasting *'blackness'* as a symbol of sorrow with the joyful assembly of the latter strophe.

The **fourth couplet** contrasts the *'darkness'* of Sinai with *'God the Judge of all,'* on the basis of God being Himself unapproachable light, in whom no darkness or shadow exists.

The **fifth contrast** is drawn between the Sinaitic *'tempest'* and the *'spirits of just men made perfect.'* Spurgeon draws his parallel here between the tempestuous *wind*, which in both Hebrew and Greek is also the word for *spirit*. He comments that the tumult of the wind at Sinai is starkly contrasted with the peaceful spirits of the righteous who have entered their rest.

The **sixth parallel** is between *'the sound of a trumpet'* and *'Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant.'* And, frankly, goes way beyond sound exegesis here, comparing the alarming and repellant sound of the trumpet with the "silver tone" of Christ, *"come, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

Finally, the **seventh pair** consists in the *'voice of words'* and *'the blood of sprinkling that speaks better than that of Abel.'* At least here there is a tangible link between

⁵⁴ Delitzsch; 344.

the 'voice' in the first strophe and the 'speaking' of the sprinkled blood of Jesus in the second.

This is an interesting example of biblical interpretation through the centuries. As noted above, the notion that Hebrews 12:18-24 contains two parallel strophes each consisting of seven evenly parallel concepts derives from the 18th Century – rather late in the history of the Church. That there be seven concepts on each side of the contrast is certainly a form of parallelism that has precedent in Scripture – the number seven being the numerical equivalent to completeness in biblical writing. The first and the last contrast have the strongest connection to one another; certainly the first pairing is indisputable. Perhaps, in the end, it is better to see the overall song as the divinely inspired hymn of a man mentally saturated in biblical and covenant history. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit would account for the number seven, even if it was somewhat unconscious on the part of the author. The human element of the passage provides sufficient explanation for the difficulty commentators will always have in lining up the pairs evenly.

It is probably best all around not to dissect the passage too finely; it is a refrain, an almost musical consummation of the argument that has unfolded over more than eleven chapters. In spite of the examples of Bengel, Spurgeon, Delitzsch, and many others, we will follow a simpler course, looking at the first verse of the song – verses 18-21 of Chapter 12 – followed by the second verse – verses 22-24.

For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling." (12:18-21)

We must not forget the operative verb of this song is the same in both verses: "*you have not come...you have come.*" This is, in a manner of speaking, a

song of ascents in that it speaks of the people of God coming into His presence. The language is that of worship, the scene shifting from Mt. Sinai to Mt. Zion, but the condition of both sets of people is the same: they are entering into the presence of their God. “The foundational experience of the people of God under the old and the new covenants is described in terms of a coming into the divine presence.”⁵⁵

This is a concept lost on much of modern professing Christianity. Too much preaching, teaching, evangelism, and counseling speaks from the perspective of God coming into our lives and saving us, fixing us, healing us, prospering us, and so on. That is not the biblical view. Rather it is man coming into the presence of God that is the fundamental paradigm of Scripture, and the elemental problem for man. Christianity does not so much bring God into man’s life, as it brings sinful man into the presence and life of God. *Selah* Without this contextual perspective, we cannot begin to appreciate what the Spirit says through the author of Hebrews in this wonderful song. We cannot begin to feel the terror that gripped even Moses as the children of Israel presented themselves before Jehovah at Mt. Sinai. And if we cannot feel that terror, we cannot apprehend the comfort that now belongs to those who, by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ, are brought near to Mt. Zion.

Verses 18-21 are a compilation under the Spirit’s guidance, of several passages from the Old Testament. The writer draws from Exodus 19:16-22 and 20:18-21 as well as from Deuteronomy 4:11-12 and 5:22-27. The first of these, from Exodus 19, sets the backdrop for the passage, with the other passages adding some color to the description.

Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount

⁵⁵ Lane; 460.

Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. Then the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.
(Exodus 19:16-20)

What is the effect of the Lord's appearing on Mt. Sinai in the hearts and minds of Israel? Terror; sheer, raw, visceral terror. "The cumulative effect from the awesome description of the tangible and threatening aspects of the scene is an indelible impression of the majestic presence of God who is unapproachable."⁵⁶ All men would do well to remember that the Law *thundered* from Sinai; the voice of God was not then 'still and small.' The people of the Old Covenant did indeed 'draw nigh' unto Jehovah at Sinai, but as Delitzsch aptly notes, "Their drawing nigh was at the same time a shrinking back."⁵⁷

The mount of divine revelation was to them unapproachable, the divine voice was full of nameless terror; and yet it was only the visible and tangible forms of nature through which God then manifested, and behind which, He hid Himself. The true and inward communion with God had not yet been revealed.⁵⁸

With this vision the whole of the Mosaic dispensation is presented to the Hebrew Christians, and to all Christians throughout the ages. All that flowed from this encounter between Israel and her God – the Ten Commandments, the Levitical system and priesthood, the tabernacle and temple liturgy and ritual, the civil and dietary regulations – all are included in what the author symbolizes as "*a mountain that may be touched.*" Even the author's description, using this enigmatic phrase rather than simply stating 'Mount Sinai,' is of great importance. This was a mountain that was material, physical, even 'carnal' – it could be touched, it was tangible like the Mosaic sacrifices and the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood that still plied their trade in Jerusalem when this letter was written. It

⁵⁶ Lane; 460.

⁵⁷ Delitzsch; 342.

⁵⁸ *Idem.*

'could be touched,' but the people were commanded not to do so – not even to allow their animals to do so. And, according to the historical record, the people *had no desire to do so!* The mountain that may be touched presented the children of Israel with a sensual manifestation of their God: visible to the eyes, audible to the ears, sensible to the touch and smell – even the air probably tasted of brimstone! It was everything anyone could want in the way of a visible form of worship; and the result was abject and horrified terror. The Hebrew Christians are to be reminded that under the Old Covenant, the approach to God is less than desirable, in spite of the many tangible and measureable features of the worship of Mosaic Judaism. "It is the whole old covenant which our author describes under the guise of the Sinai theophany. It is not simply the mountain of Sinai which is the scene of a less than perfect encounter."⁵⁹

What is amazing about the desire on the part of the Hebrew Christians to return to the Old Covenant worship – and equally amazing about modern Christians who believe that the same Old Covenant worship will be revitalized – is that the entirety of that system emphasized the fact that God was and is unapproachable. The terrors of Sinai were reaffirmed in the darkness and smoke of the Holy Place, and the veil that guarded the Holy of Holies, in both the tabernacle and the Temple. In truth, a proper conception of the condition of sinful man in the presence of undiminished holiness is far more terrifying than the any opposition or persecution meted out at the hand of man. When the author paints this word picture of the terrors of Sinai, he means to portray the terrors of the Law in all of its manifold glory under the Old Covenant. Speaking of that old dispensation, John Brown comments,

The material mountain is an emblem of its earthly and sensible character; the clouds and darkness, of its obscurity; and the tempest and flaming fire, the fearful trumpet, and yet more awful voice, of the strictness of its precepts, and of the severity of its sanctions; - the holiness and the justice of Jehovah being plainly

⁵⁹ Lane; 460.

revealed, while but a dim and imperfect manifestation was made of His grace and mercy.⁶⁰

Why on earth would the Hebrew Christians run back to a mountain from which their forefathers ran away in terror? Why indeed would modern Dispensationalism teach a re-hanging of the veil, a restoration of the terror of the Law, and a return to Sinai? Moses mediated the Law in truth, but that truth is an always will bring terror to the heart of fallen man. “And when men under the law have to deal with God, their first apprehensions of him are his holiness and severity against sinners, with his anger and displeasure against sin. There the law leaves them; and thence they must be consumed, without relief by Jesus Christ.”⁶¹

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (12:22-24)

“God dwells no more on Sinai,” writes John Owen in his commentary on this passage. That is about as succinct a summary of the second stanza of the author’s song as can be imagined. God dwells no more on Sinai – for those who are in Christ Jesus, that is; for those who, by perseverance in the faith, show themselves to be true children of the New Covenant and true citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. The whole imagery drawn so beautifully by the author in this song, is but a vivid portrayal of those who ‘shrink back’ and in whom God has no pleasure (10:38), and those who ‘draw near’ and rejoice in the blessed assembly of redemption (10:39).

Much is said in the commentaries about the individual components of this stanza – particularly with regard to the composition of the “*general assembly and*

⁶⁰ Brown; 650.

⁶¹ Owen; 314.

church of the firstborn..." But a too close analysis of the trees leads one to miss the forest altogether. "Sinai and Zion are extended metaphors that exhibit the difference in quality between the relationship to God under the old and new covenants, respectively."⁶² The most important contrast here is that of the *joy* and *comfort* in Zion with the *terror* and *insecurity* of Sinai. Compared to the temerity with which the children of Israel tip-toed around the presence of God at Sinai, the mood here portrayed of Zion is positively festive. No sensitive soul can read verses 18-21, followed immediately by verses 22-24, without feeling the elevation of both heart and head. "An overwhelming impression of the unapproachability of God is eclipsed in the experience of full access to the presence of God and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant."⁶³ Hebrews 12:18-24 is wonderful Scripture, to be sure; but it is also really good writing.

So just who is comprised in this festive assembly of redemption and glory at the spiritual mountain of Zion? Quite simply all holy beings in God's universe - angelic and human - from across all the ages and into eternity past. This is perhaps the only - it is most certainly the most beautiful - census of the kingdom of God. The angels who kept their first estate are in attendance. The faithful who lived and died before Christ's incarnation and atonement - that '*great cloud of witnesses*,' - are there, too. The Church is there, both militant and triumphant, one earth and in heaven.

But all of those in attendance who have passed from this veil of tears already *know* where they are, and in Whose presence they are, and upon what celestial mountain they stand in reverent worship of the Lamb. This passage was written for the living, who must continue to walk by faith and not by sight. This is the great assembly to which we who are in Christ *have come*. Note that the author does not write, "*you are coming*" or "*you will eventually come*" when you 'cross that 'ole river Jordan, and so forth. No, he writes emphatically, "*you are*

⁶² Lane; 461.

⁶³ Lane; 465.

come." This is the assembly to which we are drawn by the cords of love and the blood of Christ, to worship God in spirit and truth, and to do so boldly and with great joy. These are our fellow congregants and worshippers, angels included, who all owe their righteousness to the sinless offering of the Lamb whom we all adore. This is not just a mental image intended to pump us up emotionally for the race set before us. This is reality, seen now only through the eyes of faith, but no less real for that. If a man can gaze at this assembly and still shrink back into the world or the old covenant, then it cannot be doubted that he never possessed the new life and the new eyes that come by faith.

We are bound together by the tie which binds us to one God and one Saviour. We think along with them; we feel along with them. They love us; we love them. It may be the intercourse on their side with us even here is more intimate than we are aware of; and yet a little while, and the whole family will be assembled in their Father's house, never more to go out for ever.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Brown; 654.

Week 6: Gratitude: The Heart of Worship**Text Reading: Hebrews 12:25 - 29**

*"This is the only kingdom that shall never be moved,
nor can it be so,
however hell and the world rage against it."
(John Owen)*

What more can be said? The author has by this point pretty well subjected the entire Old Covenant system to an intense comparison with its New Covenant fulfillment. The previous passages was the Alpha and Omega of the whole argument – the beginning at Mt. Sinai, and the end at Mt. Zion. Previously all of his comparisons resulted in the redemption brought to completion in Jesus Christ as ‘better’ than the formative covenant of Moses. Here at the end, however, he paints so stark a contrast between Zion and Sinai that the mere comparative ‘better than’ just cannot comprehend the whole. Yes, the sprinkled blood of our One Mediator Jesus speaks *better things* than that of Abel; but that is once again a comparison of singular points, to show how much more acceptable to God was the offering of His sinless Son than the famously acceptable offering of Adam and Eve’s son.

The real impact comes, as we noted in last weeks lesson, from stepping back and taking in the whole panorama. Fire and darkness and gloom and terror under the Old Covenant; righteousness and peace and joy and worship under the New. *"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* (John 1:17) Everything the author had to say up to 12:18 served to lay a sound logical foundation for the climactic display of Sinai against Zion. To say too much afterward would defeat the purpose, to quench the fire he has hopefully lit in the hearts of his audience. The Book of Hebrews may very well have been an oratorical work before it was a literary one. If so, it was one of consummate eloquence. It should be studied in every Homiletics course in every seminary. There is a reason fireworks displays always leave their most brilliant

volley for the end, and it is here at the end of the 'sermon' that the Book of Hebrews most clearly manifests itself as the oration of a gifted speaker.

Yet the preacher did not stop abruptly at verse 24. If he had been speaking to a stable and secure congregation, free of the danger of apostasy, he might very well have done so. How sweet and comforting would be these closing words, "*and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks better things than the blood of Abel.*" With this as the end of his sermon, the preacher would leave his congregation

strengthened in their faith (knowing that Jesus Christ is the goal and fulfillment of all that went before),

encouraged in their minds (knowing the fine contrasts made throughout the sermon between Moses and Christ, Aaron and Christ, Melchizedek and Christ, etc.) and

comforted in their hearts (seeing themselves in faith and in truth as part of that great assembly of Mt. Zion).

Such would indeed constitute an excellent sermon to a mature and stable congregation. But such was not the condition of this audience; and often it is not the condition of any particular congregation. One final word is needed to bring it home. Not an anticlimax, for it is not belabored; rather one last thrust of the sword to the heart of the listener. One more "*how shall we escape if...*" (cp. 2:3).

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, (12:25)

This final exhortation opens with an imperative, *See that you do not refuse!*, and Franz Delitzsch justly imagines the pose perhaps taken by the preacher. "The word *see* is spoken, as it were, with the warning of an upraised finger."⁶⁵ Not a scolding finger, but one of fatherly – perhaps even grandfatherly –

⁶⁵Delitzsch; 354.

concern. It is as if the preacher is saying, *“What could you possibly desire more than what I have described to you of the New Covenant?”* And, *“How utterly foolish you would be to abandon this magnificent redemption to return to the gloom of Mosaic shadows!”* Ultimately each individual’s faith will prove itself to be true or false, and we may be assured that the outcome is known to God from eternity past. *“Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘the Lord knows those who are His.’”* (II Tim. 2:19) Still, we know from the holy record of redemptive history that the Holy Spirit uses the word of teaching and of exhortation and of warning, to perform His regenerative and sanctifying work within the heart of man. The wise preacher will, moved by grace and the Holy Spirit, employ the same instruments, trusting in the Lord to do His will in and through the words.

So intense is the preacher at this point that his sentences are breathless and incomplete, though the sense and meaning is impossible to miss. A literal translation of verse 25 shows the energy with which these words were spoken, with blank spaces and incomplete conclusions the audience would have had no trouble filling in.

See to it that you do not reject the One who is speaking. For if they did not escape who rejected the One who warned upon the earth, how much more shall we who turn away from the One from heaven.

The classic argument from the lesser to the greater, employed by the preacher several times already in this sermon, compares the harsh punishment meted out to those who were guilty of a lesser crime, and leaves it to the hearer to proportion the judgment warranted to those who commit the greater one. This style of argumentation with regard to divine judgment is in imitation of the Lord himself,

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have

repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. Matthew 11:20-22)

The preacher has already reminded this congregation of the fate of *“those who rejected the One speaking upon the earth,”* back in Chapter 4,

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said:

*“So I swore in My wrath,
‘They shall not enter My rest,’”* (Hebrews 4:1-3)

Who is the *“One who speaks upon the earth”*? It should be clear that it is the same who *“speaks from heaven,”* but commentators have not always caught the link between the two clauses of this verse. Some have seen a contrast between Moses, who spoke on earth, and Jesus, who speaks from heaven. But that is to confuse the conduit for the source. Throughout redemptive history the ‘speaker’ has always been God, whom we may reverently take to be the Father, the first Person in the divine Trinity. Thus the preacher to the Hebrews closes his oration as he opened it, *“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”* (1:1-2) *“The first and the last paragraphs of the Epistle, properly so called, bind together as it were all the intervening statements, illustrations, and arguments.”*⁶⁶ It is all one word, spoken by one God, though through various mouthpieces through the ages.

The contrast here in verse 25, therefore, is not between speakers. Rather it is between the location from which the voice comes. In several ways we may see that the Gospel differs from the Law to the degree that heaven differs from earth. The voice of God through Moses was upon the mountain of Sinai, accompanied by terrifying apparitions of nature. Nonetheless it was the voice of God that

⁶⁶ Brown; 656.

spoke. But the Gospel speaks from heaven – though it was first spoken on the earth – in that it is spoken by the eternal Son of God, whom God “*appointed heir of all things*” and who is the exact representation of God. Unlike Moses, who is as of the earth as was his message, Jesus Christ coupled a heavenly word with a heavenly origin. But this word is also ‘spoken from heaven’ in that Christ now sits there, seated at the right hand of God, at all times interceding and giving to the Holy Spirit that which He desires the Holy Spirit to give to us.

The author intends to say that God manifested Himself to the people of Israel on earth by causing His law to be announced to them by angels on Sinai, but now speaks to us continually from heaven through the Saviour exalted to His right hand.⁶⁷

... whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” (12:26)

This verse and the following are examples of how a mind works when it is seeped in Scripture. The preacher, we can imagine, envisioned the cataclysmic theophany at Sinai, “*whose voice once shook the earth,*” and his mind travels through time and Scripture to the second return of the people of Israel to the land. It was after the Babylonian Exile, almost a thousand years after God descended in fire and cloud and darkness upon Sinai. The place where God caused His name to dwell, the Temple, had been destroyed a generation earlier by the forces of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and now the few Israelites who had returned home with Zerubbabel were trying to rebuild it. Compared to Solomon’s wonder, the ‘second’ temple was quite pitiful and the refugees lamented the loss of grandeur and glory. This is all recorded by the prophet Haggai, to whom the mind of the preacher quickly shifts when he considers the concept of ‘shaking.’

⁶⁷ Delitzsch; 357.

The theme remains the same – we are still dealing with God’s people in the divine presence. But the preacher deftly moves to a time in redemptive history when God again reminded the Old Covenant community of the coming of that which these New Covenant believers were the gracious beneficiaries.

For thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘And in this place I will give peace,’ says the LORD of hosts.” (Haggai 2:6-9)

In order to understand the reference made by the preacher to the Hebrews, one must first understand the prophecy of Haggai, for as John Owen properly notes, the two are referring to one and the same event.⁶⁸ The Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai in order to encourage and comfort those Israelites who had hazarded the return trip to Canaan, and whose hearts were filled with sorrow because of the diminished glory of the second temple. But outward appearances are often deceiving, and God promised that this relatively miserable structure they had built would, in fact, witness far greater glory than did Solomon’s gorgeous Temple in all of its years. Considering the fact that this second temple was utterly destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, it is eminently reasonable to suppose that either this ‘greater glory’ came before that date, or that the prophecy of Haggai went unfulfilled. The latter option is manifestly ridiculous.

The ‘greater glory’ of the second temple was the same event prophesied by Malachi, also a post-exilic prophet.

*Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.
And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight.
Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.* (Malachi 3:1)

⁶⁸ Owen; 364.

The 'messenger of the Covenant' of Malachi is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. It was He who called the second temple, *My Father's House* and, by an extension not lost upon the Pharisees, His own house. "In the development of the plan of salvation, it was Haggai's special vocation to predict that the great consummation was to be attached to the second temple, and the worldwide rule of David to be realized in this line of Zerubbabel."⁶⁹ It was "*zeal for Thy House*" that consumed Jesus, and brought Him to 'His temple.' This glorious event was future for Haggai and Malachi, but it was past for the preacher to the Hebrews. For the modern American church, raised in Dispensational theology and eschatology, that is a very important point to consider.

Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. (12:27)

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the events foretold by the post-exilic prophets had not taken place in the past, but were in the very process of taking place when this sermon was first preached. We have often had occasion to see the drawing out of events that seem prophetically to be single points in time, but in fulfillment to encompass a whole generation. Indeed, it was Jesus who came unto His Temple, and with Him far greater glory than ever witnessed by the First Temple. But the shaking only started then; it was still shaking thirty years later.

One hermeneutical error that is consistently made with regard to passages and prophecies such as this one, is to take the words in too literal and natural a sense. There were no reported earthquakes when Christ entered the Temple in Jerusalem (though there was one as He hung on the cross). Nor was the preacher himself prophesying that a literal earthquake was destined to strike either Jerusalem or Rome and "*remove the things that can be shaken.*" Such a literal

⁶⁹ Delitzsch; 360.

method of interpretation leads the reader to seek that which may never come, and to miss that which has already come. In the context of both Haggai and Hebrews, *those things which can be shaken* most certainly refer to Mosaic Judaism and the whole temple system of Levitical priests, sacrifices, and ordinances. The earlier words of Hebrews are reiterated here, only in different terms and with a different word picture, *"In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."*⁷⁰

The words are figurative and not literal. "To shake heaven and earth, is in Scripture often expressive of a very great change."⁷¹ And that has been the constant theme throughout Hebrews: a great change has taken place, so great that it fulfills, completes, and brings to an end that which went before. Thus *"those things which may be shaken"* are, plain and simply, all the Mosaic system to which these Hebrew Christians were being tempted to return. The terminology is spiritual and metaphorical, but in this case the event was also manifested in the physical realm. The shaking began with the Incarnation of Christ, continued and intensified during His earthly ministry – especially that portion of His ministry spent in Jerusalem and in the Temple. The shaking continued through the early years of the Church, from Pentecost's roaring wind through the social upheaval of the thousand of Jews added to the Church. But soon the shaking would come to an end, leaving nothing standing but that which was endured with permanence. This occurred in AD 70 when the Roman legions breached the walls of Jerusalem, slaughtered its inhabitants, and pulled down the Second Temple *"so that not one stone was standing upon another."*

The tendency of modern expositors to place this ultimate 'shaking' at the end of the age, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, are not so much guilty of error in eschatology as they are of error in exegesis. It is almost certain that the consummation of the age will be even more cataclysmic than the destruction of

⁷⁰ Hebrews 8:13

⁷¹ Brown; 661.

Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman forces under Titus. The problem is that such an event is nowhere in the mind of the preacher to the Hebrews. He is concerned with the imminent danger of apostasy on the part of the Hebrew Christians, and in the Spirit foretells of the imminent *shaking of those things which can be shaken*. The whole message has been on persevering faith – faith that endures opposition and persecution and does not shrink back. This is that which cannot be shaken, and which will be found standing after everything else has crumbled away. “Everything in the new dispensation is solid. We have not the emblem of Divinity, but God Himself; not a typical expiation, but a real atonement; not bodily purifications, but spiritual holiness; all is spiritual, all is real, all is permanent.”⁷²

Only events in the near future would serve as cogent mental prods to these wavering Christians. We cannot determine exactly when this epistle/sermon was first delivered, but we may conclude from what has been said in earlier passages that the Levitical religion was still in full force at the Temple in Jerusalem, the *Second Temple* that had already witnessed and rejected the ‘greater glory’ when He came. If the supposition that these Hebrew Christians lived in Rome is correct, can a more vivid exclamation point be imagined to the preacher’s message, than watching the sacred paraphernalia of that Temple paraded through the streets of their city by the triumphant Titus? The thousands of Jews in chains, testifying to the conquering might of Rome and soon either to be executed or sold into slavery, would grip and turn the stomachs of every Hebrew believer watching. And these words would echo in their minds, “*And this expression, ‘Yet once more,’ denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.*” The Second Temple – a temple made with hands – gone; the true Temple still standing. The Mosaic High Priest, killed; the true High Priest ever living to make intercession for His people. If the Hebrews Christians chose

⁷² Brown; 664.

to reject the preacher's message, and to return to Mosaic Judaism, not only would they be returning to "*the mountain that may be touched...*" but they would also be returning to a religion living on borrowed time. The note was soon to come due.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. (12:28-29)

*"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person."*⁷³ This is wisdom, the same as it has been from Solomon to Hebrews. Only now the greatness of the revelation that has come to God's people, through the appearance of His Son Jesus Christ, supremely validates that wisdom for every professing believer. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes lived in the age of the First Temple, and truly saw as in a mirror dimly. The Preacher to the Hebrews lived, as we do, in the age of the True Temple, not the pattern on earth, but the spiritual reality in heaven. Qohelet was evidently a member of the Davidic family and thus a leader in the Davidic Kingdom. The writer of Hebrews had no royal blood in his mortal veins, but was nonetheless a citizen (and prince) of a far greater kingdom. David's kingdom was shaken, and rattled, and burned, and razed to the ground. *"We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."*

There is only one such kingdom: the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. "This kingdom, then, is that rule of Christ in and over the gospel-state of the church, which the [author of Hebrews] has proven to be more excellent than that of the law. Hereunto belong all the light, liberty, righteousness, and peace, which by the gospel we are made partakers of...Christ is the *king*, the gospel is his

⁷³ Ecclesiastes 12:13

law, all believers are his *subjects*, the Holy Spirit is its *administrator*, and all the divine treasures of grace and mercy are its *revenue*.⁷⁴

The case against apostasy has been made; the cure is now prescribed: “*Let us have grace...*” The phrase is somewhat obscure due to the fact that the word ‘grace’ can carry a number of different meanings. It becomes a bit more obscure when we realize that Christian readers tend to interpret certain words within a very narrow band of understanding. For instance, we have been taught that grace is ‘unmerited favor.’ But ‘let us have unmerited favor’ does not make sense, for the fact that we have already received unmerited favor is the foundation of our faith, not the goal. But if we realize that the word ‘grace’ is of the same family as ‘gracious’ and ‘gratitude,’ we come closer to the meaning of the author in this penultimate verse.⁷⁵

“*Let us have grace,*” then, is a Hebraistic way of saying “*Let us be thankful.*” This in and of itself is a pretty remarkable thing. After describing in vivid and magnificent detail all of the glories of the New Covenant, and outlining the privileges of membership therein and the dangers of falling away there from, one might expect a litany of religious duties to be enjoined upon the congregation. “Do penance!” “Go, sell all that you have...” Or at least, “Feel guilty about even entertaining the temptation to apostasy!” No, we are told to *be thankful*, and what can be (and should be) easier than that? Perhaps this is the lightness of the burden given to us when we come unto Him: whereas the scribes and Pharisees laid on the backs of the Jews heavy burdens they themselves were unwilling to bear, our Lord has taken our crushing burden upon Himself and bids us, only, to give thanks.

Is this not the wisdom of the wisest sage? In consideration of all that God has done for you, that you return to Him thanksgiving? Brown writes, “*Gratitude*

⁷⁴ Owen; 370.

⁷⁵ Brown; 668.

is, as it were, the soul and the sum of the Christian's duty."⁷⁶ And Delitzsch adds, "Thankfulness is the alpha and omega of all true service of God."⁷⁷

The preacher closes with a solemn verity regarding the nature of God that is both comforting and unnerving at the same time, "*For our God is a consuming fire.*" The comfort in this phrase may not be apparent at first, but that would only be due to a misconception regarding God. He is fire, and unapproachable light, in whose presence no sin may stand; all true. But greater is the gratitude and praise when the believer realizes that the very fire that consumes the wicked also consumes the wickedness in the redeemed sinner's heart. The very same fire of wrath against unbelievers is the fire of sanctification toward believers. We therefore approach boldly before a God whose just wrath has been justly satisfied on our behalf in Christ Jesus, yet with that settled knowledge that "There is something awful in everything connected with God."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Brown; 668.

⁷⁷ Delitzsch; 366.

⁷⁸ Brown; 669.

Week 7: Epilogue: Concern & Contentment**Text Reading: Hebrews 13:1 - 6**

"Contentment drinks the cream of life."

(Charles Haddon Spurgeon)

It is not always easy to see the connections between passages of the Bible, and it is very tempting to forge links that do not exist. Such is the case with Chapter 13 of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It seems evident from reading the closing verses of Chapter 12 that the main thrust of the author's argument has ended there; the opening verses of Chapter 13 form an entirely different line of thought. If the entire book were indeed an epistle then the transition between this chapter and the preceding one would be about as abrupt as one can imagine. What has the love of the brethren to do with God as a consuming fire? Well, certainly a connection can be made through the second great commandment – *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself,"* but this would be just the sort of forged link that does more to break the continuity of thought than to aid it.

The overarching theme of the previous twelve chapters has been an earnest admonition to the Hebrew Christians to stand firm in their faith and to resist the temptation to fall back into the Mosaic Judaism of their unbelieving countrymen. Except for verses 13 & 14 of Chapter 13, there is little on that theme in this closing chapter of the book. Taken with the fact that the opening chapter does not bear the typical marks of salutation expected in a letter, the discontinuity of Chapter 13 helps to solidify the conclusion that the whole was originally a sermon, with this closing chapter being appended to the written form as it was subsequently sent to the believing communities. It is a chapter of exhortations and admonitions, many of which do not flow seamlessly together. One can imagine the author using 'bullet point' in presenting this material – if bullet points had been in use by the Greeks.

Yet the exhortation of Chapter 13 are by no means arbitrary, and are by no means entirely disconnected from what has gone before. The author of the book, who was undoubtedly the original preacher of the sermon, adds a personal and pastoral epilogue to the recorded version of the sermon – it stands to reason that the things he writes in that epilogue will have some logical connection to the content and import of the sermon itself. This connection may be found in the fact that the majority of the exhortative ‘bullet points’ of Chapter 13 have to do with the health of the community of believers – their interaction with one another and their relationship to one another. If the clear message of Chapters 1 – 12 is “Don’t Apostatize!” then the message of Chapter 13 is “You are not alone!”

The great temptation that stood before them was to blend back into their ancestral people – their ‘brethren according to the flesh,’ as it were. If these Hebrew Christians would simply once again behave like good Jews, and leave off any overt mention of Jesus Christ as the Messiah – then the Jewish community as a whole would remain at peace, and the Roman authorities would leave them alone. If we had to fit Chapter 13 into the pattern of Chapters 1 – 12, then we could say that just as the former section proves Jesus to be a ‘better Mediator’ and Christianity a ‘better salvation,’ so also life in Christ places the believer into a ‘better community.’ Beginning with verse 1, “*Let the love of the brethren continue,*” the epilogue highlights one more paradigm shift for the Hebrew believer: he now has a new brotherhood, a brotherhood of the Spirit joined by the blood of Christ, a tie infinitely stronger than the blood of Abraham. “But the persons he was addressing were not only *Jews*, but *Christians*; and as Christians they formed part of a spiritual brotherhood bound together by ties more intimate and sacred.”⁷⁹

Thus we do not expect to find in this epilogue the same tightly woven argumentation that moved through the entire Old Covenant dispensation as it moved through the first twelve chapters of Hebrews. Rather we find individual

⁷⁹ Brown; 672.

points of admonition that consistently remind the Hebrew believer of his participation in a new community,

...a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. (I Peter 2:9-10)

Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also. (13:1-3)

‘Let *philadelphia* continue unchanged!’ An encouraging way to start the chapter of exhortations – to admonish a continuation of an attitude both good and apparently present within the community of Jewish Christians in Rome. But this follows from what the author has already spoken in the sermon portion of the book,

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.

(Hebrews 10:32-35)

The ‘love of the brethren’ formerly exhibited by these believers was an active and dangerous love, a willingness to associate with those who were already being persecuted because of their Christian faith. Here at the opening of the epilogue, the author tells the Hebrew Christian community to ‘close ranks,’ which has always been the greatest defense against apostasy. This admonition comes under the rubric of ‘United we stand; divided we fall.’ The community of believers has at all times been impervious to the seduction of unbelief, just as the herd of gazelle is safe from hungry predators. It is the lone, doubting Christian

who is most vulnerable to the temptation of falling away, of abandoning the profession and returning to a life of unbelief.

There are two ways - one positive, one negative - in which a stable community can maintain the solidarity that will strengthen the whole against the loss of any part. The first is found again in Hebrews 10, and it is the positive step each individual believer must take, and continually take, that the whole community might remain together,

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. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

The second means by which a community maintains its solidarity is negative, and we have only recently been reminded of the necessity of vigilance on each member of the community,

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled (Hebrews 12:14-15)

Positively assembling together, and negatively watching over the whole community for signs of dangerous doubt - these exhortations are contained in the short phrase: *Let the love of the brethren continue*. These are the means by which the community maintains that status, but there is also need of instruction toward believers who, by divine providence, are found separated from the community. What is to be done in such cases constitutes the immediate exposition by the author of his opening command, *Let the love of the brethren continue*.

"Be not forgetful or neglecting of hospitality" is the first admonition toward those who find themselves separated from their usual community of fellowship. For 'hospitality' here does not mean what it has come to mean in our day, and thus the interpretation and application of this common verse is often off the

mark. Literally the word should be rendered in English as “*love to strangers*,” forming a direct parallel with the ‘love of brethren’ in verse 1. That word is the very familiar *philadelphia*, this one is less well known, *philozenias*. Thus ‘hospitality’ in the biblical sense is not simply having people over for dinner; it is opening one’s home to strangers in need of room and board. Our understanding of the concept involved here comes from a study of the historical context of the biblical world, a world very different from our own.

To be hospitable, in the common use of the term, is descriptive of the disposition and habit of liberally entertaining friends, relations, neighbors, or acquaintances. Where such entertainments proceed from genuine kindness, and are unstained by excess, where they do not occupy too much time, where they do not in their expense trench on the demands of justice and benevolence, they are at least innocent, and may serve a number of useful purposes. The Christian duty here enjoined is something totally different.⁸⁰

We must first keep in mind that the ‘strangers’ in *philozenias* are themselves the ‘brothers’ we are exhorted to love in *philadelphia*. These are traveling Christians – away from their ‘home’ congregation either due to missionary activity or to persecution in their region of the world. In the ancient world there was no one leaving the light on for you when you traveled. We see classic examples of biblical hospitality in Abraham’s care of the three visiting ‘men,’ and in Lot’s concern that the two ‘men’ not spend the night in the town square. Both men ‘entertained angels unaware.’ It was (and still is) the custom of the Near East that traveling strangers are to be not only welcomed into one’s home, but treated as honored guests.

The accepted system of hospitality was carefully guarded by custom, so that it would not be corrupted by freeloaders. Consider the words of the apostle John with regard to the proper hospitality to be shown to ‘strangers,’

⁸⁰ Brown; 674.

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive^{el} such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth. (III John 5-8)

It was expected of believing communities throughout the Mediterranean world that traveling teachers, prophets, or believers displaced from their homes, would be 'put up for the night,' as it were – taken care of for a reasonable period of time. *This* is biblical hospitality – a love of the brethren that in many cases was life saving. But the danger of abuse was no less tangible then than now. The 2nd Century church manual, *Didache*, sets stringent guidelines on hospitality,

But receive everyone who comes in the name of the Lord, and prove and know him afterward; for you shall have understanding right and left. If he who comes is a wayfarer, assist him as far as you are able; but he shall not remain with you more than two or three days, if need be. But if he wants to stay with you, and is an artisan, let him work and eat. But if he has no trade, according to your understanding, see to it that, as a Christian, he shall not live with you idle. But if he wills not to do, he is a Christ-monger. Watch that you keep away from such. (Didache 12:1-5)

The negative side of biblical hospitality is the hypocrisy we read of in the Epistle of James,

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

It is not as easy to apply biblical hospitality in our modern world, especially in a country tolerant of Christianity and full of hotels. One simple way that modern Christian fellowships observe this virtue is by providing room and board for missionaries on furlough or deputation, and another would be to make one's home available to believers seeking asylum in our country on account of

persecution in their own land. These two circumstances separated believers from their familiar community in the 1st Century, and they continue to do so in the 21st.

But there is another way that believers may be separated from their community – imprisonment on account of their faith. Again, not nearly as common in our time and country as it was in the Roman world of the early Church, but not unheard of, either. If we keep in mind the extreme danger facing any believer (or any sheep) separated from the community (or flock), it then becomes crystal clear why the author is issuing these particular commands. The *brotherly love* of verse 1 is a dangerous and active *concern* for fellow believers who find themselves alone in the world, or in the prison. The voice of our Lord resounds in these brief exhortations,

*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: **for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.**' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, **'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'***
(Matthew 25:37-40)

Realizing the proper context of biblical hospitality and biblical care – two equally important components of biblical 'brotherly love' – presents modern Christians with a challenge with regard to application. It may well be that these are not virtues that can be scheduled on a calendar; rather they require a attitude of readiness. This is probably the meaning of the phrase "*entertaining angels unaware*" and explains the consternation of the sheep in the Matthean passage,

wondering how it was that they rendered such service to their Lord. People do not plan to be displaced, nor do they plan to be put in prison; but among Christians in a fallen world, these things do occur. It is to the praise of any congregation that they be ready ‘in season and out,’ as it were, to provide for the needs of dislocated brethren. The necessity of biblical hospitality and care is illustrated in all of the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, as are the divine rewards that accompany well-doing. In his last known letter, he speaks in praise of Onesiphorus on this account, and scathingly of two others who failed to honor him as a brother in either his travels or his travails.

This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day—and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus. (II Timothy 1:15-18)

We summarize the first three verses of Hebrews 13 with a diagram that will hopefully set in our minds the proper relationship of the terms used here, and the attitudes and actions to which every Christian community is exhorted.

Let the love of the brethren continue

- not neglecting the love of strangers in the faith
 - some of whom might be angels
- not forgetting those in bonds for the faith
 - as bound with them

or those in adversity

- as being together in one body.

Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (13:4)

This is one of the verses that seems somewhat arbitrary in its location, at least until we remember that it is the solidarity of the community that forms the theme of these exhortations. Modern expositors tend to interpret this passage in light of the Roman Catholic exaltation of celibacy and the consequent prohibition against marriage enjoined upon priests and nuns. Such a perspective is both anachronistic and misleading. The practice of clerical celibacy was still a long way off into the future when the Epistle to the Hebrews was first circulated. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church *does* hold marriage in high regard – at least as it applied to the laity. So while it is true that the requirement of celibacy on the ministers of the Church is both unbiblical and dangerous, this is not the proof text thereof.

Again, the context must govern. It is a sad fact of history that Christian communities have chronically been prone to lasciviousness and immorality – taking the admonition to ‘hold all things in common’ to apply even to the relationship of a man and woman in marriage. The earliest congregations were charged with such practices, though in their case it appears to have been a purposeful misinterpretation of the ‘love feast’ by the enemies of the faith. Yet we do see some gross immorality in the Corinthian church, and there are sporadic manifestations of ‘free love’ in Christian communities throughout its history. One of the most notorious examples of this behavior – the details of which are unnecessary to repeat – was the ‘Kingdom of Münster’ in the days of the Reformation. It is against such mistaken interpretations of the freedom believers have in Christ, and to an immoral extension of the community that infringes upon the sanctity of the marriage bed, that Hebrews 13:4 is aimed.

Marriage is the oldest divine institution, and the only one that stands as a metaphor for the intended relationship between God and His people. Furthermore, and perhaps more in keeping with the theme of this chapter,

marriage is the social glue that stabilizes a community. *Marriage* is the rock upon which *family* is built, and *family* is the solid brick of every lasting, stable society. If the preservation of the Christian community was indeed the primary concern of these admonitions (and it should be the primary concern of every pastor in every age), then the place where ultimate failure begins is a crack in the foundation of marriage.

Marriage, as an institution, has in every age received the approving sanction of every enlightened philosopher and every wise legislator; and this opinion of those who would banish or degrade it has always been considered by sober thinkers as a sentiment indicative of a dark mind and a depraved heart, and which, if brought into action, would be found equally hostile to the worth and to the happiness of mankind.⁸¹

Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (13:5-6)

The word translated 'covetousness' is literally 'the love of money,' the very same word said to be the root of all sorts of evil in I Timothy 6,

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

(I Timothy 6:6-10)

If, as we concluded in the last chapter, *gratitude* is the chief service of worship to God, then *contentment* is the manifestation of that worship in this life. "The author goes on to tell us what the essential nature of true Christians is, and how they are to behave; a mode of thought and action which is free from the love of money and worldly possession generally, and contenting themselves with the

⁸¹ Brown; 678.

things which are present.”⁸² There is no more powerful witness of divine grace in a man’s life than that of contentment, for as Spurgeon eloquently puts it, “Contentment drinks the cream of life.”⁸³

And the author of Hebrews puts the matter in the most powerful way, exhorting believers to be content *with the things as present* or *with such things as they now have*. This is a phrase worth meditating upon, for in a few words the author has fully and truly *defined* contentment. Contentment can never be contingent; its measure must always be *the present things*. “Indeed, if we do not make this the standard of contentment, we will never be content at all.”⁸⁴ But biblical contentment must not be confused with apathy, nor does it in any way conflict with the betterment of one’s lot. That is all that is contained in ‘things present’ – not a false nostalgia for things past, nor a contingent yearning for things yet to be, but a settled satisfaction that the things present are so according to the wise providence of a loving God.

This contentment is not at all inconsistent with a duly regulated desire to improve our circumstances, and the use of the lawful means fitted for obtaining this purpose. It does not consist in a slothful neglect of the business of life, or a real or pretended apathy to worldly interests. It is substantially a satisfaction with God as our portion, and with what He is pleased to appoint for us.⁸⁵

Again keeping things in context, we can readily understand the reason for this admonition being included in a series of exhortations designed to promote community solidarity. Covetousness and discontent are divisive and destructive of any community, and a striving after what others have leading to jealousy and bitterness. James sternly challenged believers on this score, finding the root cause of division and enmity within the community in covetousness and discontent,

⁸² Delitzsch; 373.

⁸³ Spurgeon; *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*; Volume 32 (1886); 38.

⁸⁴ Brown; 682.

⁸⁵ *Idem*.

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:1-4)

There is a balance in the Christian life; an equilibrium between energetic pursuit of life's goals and settled contentment with things as they presently are. It flows from an understanding that God has set purpose into man's heart, and has "*given all things to enjoy*" in life, as "*sanctified by prayer and thanksgiving.*" It flows from an understanding that in all things "*we are more than conquerors*" in Christ, and that no created thing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. It flows from the divine promise that "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" while at the same time the assurance that He will "*not tempt you beyond what you are able.*" It hinges upon the knowledge that whatever God ordains for 'this present time' is undoubtedly best, wisest, and most loving. In short, "if infinite power be our defence [*sic*], and infinite wisdom our guide, and infinite love and excellence our portion - what need of covetousness, what ground of contentment!"⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Brown; 683.

Week 8: Epilogue: Follow the Leaders**Text Reading: Hebrews 13:7 - 9**

*“A Christian course of conduct,
which up to the last breath of even a natural death
is a confirmation and reflection of a life of faith,
attains an end well worthy of imitation.”
(Franz Delitzsch)*

What is it about the Christian faith that has perennially made the religion so repugnant to other members of society? Many world religions have found room in their own systems for the man, Jesus, either as a prophet, or a great moral teacher, or even a shaman. Christianity is a near cousin to Judaism, having descended from the same patriarchs, and shares its monotheistic foundation also with Islam. On moral and ethical grounds, it is hard to fault the ‘family-values’ teachings of Christianity, which are in many points identical to the ethical precepts of other religions. Even when viewed from a historical perspective, Christianity has managed to blend itself into just about every conceivable cultural milieu the world over. Historian Derek Wilson, in his biography of Charlemagne, comments on this point, “It is part of the genius of Christianity that it is amazingly adaptable. Over the centuries it has taken root in all major cultures.”⁸⁷ This is true; Christianity has adapted far more successfully to a far broader spectrum of world cultures than any other religion. And to the extent that it has thus adapted, it has coexisted alongside of a myriad of religions in relative, though often tenuous, peace.

Yet seasons of persecution have always afflicted the Church, in all lands and from all sides. It has been the working hypothesis of this study that just such a season was potentially awaiting the Hebrew Christians in Rome in the middle of the first century, and the threat of a fresh outbreak of anti-Christian hostility was tempting many of the professing believers in this congregation to ‘tone down’ their profession, or even to abandon it altogether. What is it about

⁸⁷ Wilson, Derek, *Charlemagne* (New York: Doubleday; 2006); 145.

Christianity that throws its opponents over the edge from peaceful coexistence to open warfare? While there may be many auxiliary causes for persecution, there has always been one common denominator to persecution: the *complete necessity* and the *utter sufficiency* of Jesus Christ for salvation.

This is a matter of Christian doctrine, and most outbursts of persecution against the Church have been due to doctrine rather than practice. The world does not care so much what Christians *do* as what the Church *teaches*. Nor is it everything that comprises Christian 'doctrine' that the world finds offensive. For instance, even the controversial (within Christianity) doctrine of predestination is hardly very troublesome for many other world religions. Islam has *kismet*, which is essentially the same as the Stoics' *Fate*. The Norse pagans consider all events to be determined by the 'spinnners,' three old hags who lived at the base of the Tree of Life, Yggdrasil, and weave the threads of every man's destiny. So the concept of predetermination is hardly a point of conflict. Nor is the concept of 'faith,' which is a common component in all religion. Even atheism exists upon the belief that there is no God, nothing to believe in.

And as noted above, even the man Jesus Christ is not sufficient to explain the chronic nature and ferocity of persecution against Christians throughout the past two millennia. Muslims 'honor' Jesus as the sixth prophet of Allah, the penultimate prophet before their Muhammad. Jesus is a shaman in many Eastern Mystic faiths, a subordinate god in the doctrines of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a great man who became Earth's god to the Mormons, and a gifted moral teacher and exemplar to rationalists and atheists. There is no need to jettison Jesus in order to live at peace with our non-Christian neighbors. But we do have to be very selective as to what we say *about* Jesus Christ if peace at all costs is what we seek.

Comments like "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,*" were bound to get one in trouble with the Jews; "*King of kings and Lord of lords*" did not go over well with the Romans; "*I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man comes to the*

Father but by Me,” is generally unpopular with all sorts of mankind. Yet these statements of Scripture, and many more like them, are the heart and soul of Christian doctrine concerning Jesus Christ, and they form the very core of the Christian Gospel.

It is for that reason that the author of the Epilogue to the Hebrews, wanting to strengthen the Christian community in Rome against the temptation of apostasy, exhorts them now to *“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you.”* It was not enough for the Hebrew Christians to attempt to maintain their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, if at the same time they emptied that profession of all true meaning. It is in answer to the Lord’s question, *“Who do you say that I am?”* that the believer’s relationship to the world is usually determined, or rather the world’s relationship to the believer. Thus far in Chapter 13 the corporate admonitions have been rather benign: hospitality, kindness and compassion for the dislocated and oppressed, marriage held in honor and sanctity, contentment rather than voracious greed – hardly the stuff to foment persecution. Verse 7, however, brings us back to the crux of the matter, the limit past which no true believer may go in his attempt to *“live at peace with all men.”* The world will often forgive us our Ecclesiology, our Eschatology, our Hamartology (although the very mention of sin is certainly a goad in the world’s side), even our Soteriology; but not our Christology. Jesus Christ was, is, and will be the ‘skandalon’ until the end of the age, the *Stone that makes men stumble, and the Rock that makes men fall.*

*Along the path of life there lies a stubborn Scandalon
And all who come this way must be offended
To some He is a barrier, To others He's the way
For all should know the scandal of believing*

*He will be the truth that will offend them one and all
A stone that makes men stumble and a rock that makes them fall
Many will be broken so that He can make them whole
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul*

(from “Skandalon” by Michael Card)

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. (13:7)

Although it may not seem to be the case at first glance, verse 7 is closely connected to verses 8 & 9 - actually *to* verse 9 *through* verse 8 - and the three verses together form a bookend partnered with verse 17. These two sets of verses bracket a complete thought, verses 10-16, which are thematically linked to their bookends. A thorough understanding of verse 7, therefore, is imperative to the proper interpretation of the whole section.

It is immediately apparent that the context is still corporate - i.e., the ethical behavior of the congregation as a whole, so vitally important to the preservation of the faith of each individual member. The focus now turns to the relationship of the community of faith to its leaders, its 'rulers.' There are several things to note about how these men are described. First, though the New King James Version does not clearly bring this out, the reference is in the past tense. Not the remembering; that is to be perpetually present tense. But the leaders themselves; they are no longer around. Delitzsch exegetes this fact from the terms used by the author: "From the words *remember* and *who spoke*, we may conclude that *the end of their conduct* is to be understood neither as a heavenly reward, nor as the result of Christian conduct following in another world, but as the end of life."⁸⁸ In other words, these leaders were dead.

This aspect of the leaders in verse 7 having passed from the scene is not only evident from the words used there, but also necessary to prevent verse 17 from being somewhat redundant. As William Lane notes, "The references to former leaders, who had preached the word of God to the community (v. 7), and to current leaders, whose authority is to be respected (v. 17), are complementary."⁸⁹ Thus we conclude that the leaders referred to in verse 7 are those whose lives testified a steadfast faith maintained to the hour of their

⁸⁸ Delitzsch; 376.

⁸⁹ Lane; 526.

deaths, and were therefore lives worth remembering and imitating. It is not necessary that the end of life for these former leaders came violently; there is nothing in the terminology that requires an interpretation that the rulers of the congregation had been martyred. In fact, the *end* of their lives is simply mentioned as a matter of fact; it is the *manner* of their lives up to that end that is the matter of focus: "*Remember...considering the outcome of their conduct.*"

It is even more inadmissible to view these 'rulers' as being members of the original apostolate, or even those lieutenants like Timothy and Silas who were commissioned by the Apostles. No, these 'rulers' were the leaders of the congregation comprised of the very same Hebrew Christians to whom this epistle is addressed. These were *their* leaders in a very intimate sense; these were the men on the spot during the previous chronological phase of this church's life, and it was to their teachings and to their faith that the Hebrew Christians are now brought to remembrance. "There can be no doubt that the persons referred to were the *pastors*, or elders, or bishops of the Hebrew Church. These pastors are represented as at once *rulers* and *teachers*."⁹⁰

This comment by John Brown brings to notice the second important aspect of the rulers mentioned in verse 7: their authority was tied to their teaching. These were men *who had the rule over you* due to the fact, and only due to the fact, that they *spoke the word of God to you*. It is probably true that the elders of the early Church were consecrated for office by the laying on of hands by the presbytery – each new elder ordained by the current body of elders. But while that ordination set the man apart for the work that he was to do, it did not convey to him any measure of objective authority, in and of itself. This is the error of the Roman Catholic Church manifested in their sacrament of 'holy orders' – that the chrism (anointing) of the sacrament operates independently of the man or of his work, the doctrine of *ex opera operato*. No, a man is not made a

⁹⁰ Brown; 686.

ruler of God's people by the anointing of oil, but by the faithfulness of proclaiming the Word of God to those people.

In other words, the authority of the leaders of any Christian congregation is *objective* only in the sense that they hold an office that should be respected; but is *subjective* in that it is derived solely from the Word of God faithfully proclaimed. This subjective boundary to ecclesiastical authority is incredibly important to the continued health and strength of the Christian community from generation to generation. If we consider the leadership of the church in terms of the functions of any government, we find that the elders of the congregation are members of the *executive* branch, and not of the *legislative*. "In all this they exercised no legislative authority; they had no power to enjoin new law, to initiate new ordinances, to invent new terms of communion."⁹¹ In the exercise of his pastoral office, an elder is circumscribed by the Word of God, the *thus saith the Lord* of Scripture. "No other grounding and safeguarding of the position of the leaders is provided than the authority that results from the word proclaimed."⁹²

There is a remarkable logical disconnect in John Brown's commentary on this point, one that is common within the Presbyterian polity. Brown, as noted above, acknowledges both that these men were the pastors (he uses the terms *pastor*, *elder*, and *bishop* interchangeably, which is in accordance with the biblical usage) of the church, and that their sole fountain of authority is their teaching of the Word of God. Thus far so good. But then he proceeds to defend the Presbyterian 'three office view,' which makes a separation between 'ruling' elders and 'teaching' elders. Consider the *non sequitur* here: an elder derives his authority to 'rule' solely from his teaching; yet there are elders who 'rule' but do not teach, as there are elders who both rule and teach. By what authority do Presbyterian 'ruling' elders rule? Merely by the authority given them by the

⁹¹ Brown; 686.

⁹² Lane; 526.

laying on of hands – a sacramental authority that neither Scripture, nor John Brown, allows. Listen to what he later writes concerning the faithful discharge of a ruler's office, and see if any room can be found for the Presbyterian invention of the 'ruling elder' who does not teach.

But, in truth, it is only in the degree in which we 'speak the word of God' – in which we clearly exhibit its meaning and evidence, in which we bring man's mind into contact with God's mind – that we discharge our duty to our Master, or promote the real spiritual improvement of our hearers.⁹³

It is, in summary, the faithfulness of the teaching of these departed rulers that is to be remembered by the surviving congregation. Or we may put it this way, the departed rulers are to be remembered *in their teaching*, which was faithful to the word of God throughout their ministry to the Hebrew congregation. The continuity of faithful teaching is the true 'apostolic succession;' now that the revelation of God has come in its completeness and finality through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-2), there is no ground or justification for novelty or adulteration of the biblical message. The author of Hebrews is bringing to his readers' attention the actual operation in the church's life of the admonition of the apostle Paul to Timothy,

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (II Timothy 2:1-2)

This adherence to the word of God does not preclude growth in understanding; there is no doubt that we later Christians have benefited immensely from the study of those who have gone before us, and continue to teach us through their sermons, books, and commentaries. But the core message of the Gospel remains unaltered, for it is founded on the person and work of One

⁹³ Brown; 688.

who remains unaltered by time. In this is found the true security of the Church against the danger of apostasy.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (13:8)

It must be admitted that this verse seems to lack natural coherence with what has gone before, and with what goes after. This is true based on the form of the verse, and its apparent abruptness in the text. But when we understand the overall admonition contained here with regard to the continuity of sound, biblical teaching from the 'rulers' of the congregation, verse 8 not only attains coherence, but takes on a foundational importance to the rest of the context. In itself it appears to be either the refrain from an early hymn, or a catechal or confessional statement. This is more apparent when the order of the original words is noted, though translated, of course, into English:

*Jesus Christ
Yesterday and Today
the Same
And unto the ages (forever)*

This structure serves simultaneously to emphasis three different and important points. The first, manifested by its location at the beginning of the sentence, is the Name of Jesus Christ, upon Whom all authority is vested and from Whom all authority flows. The second point is that 'yesterday and today' are separated in the verse from 'forever.' This emphasizes the time context of what the author is driving at in this whole section. Verse 7 admonishes believers to remember *yesterday's* rulers; while verse 17 exhorts them to obey *today's* rulers. The continuity between the successive generations of leaders in Christ's Church is Jesus Christ Himself, about whom nothing 'new' can be said, nor anything already said omitted. This passing of the torch from generation to generation will continue *unto the ages* inasmuch as Jesus Christ will remain the same *unto the*

ages. It becomes an unbroken chain of faithful preaching and teaching in the true Church. Finally, set as a jewel in the midst of its ring, Jesus Christ is *the same* – unaltered and unalterable, the Rock upon which the Church is built and the unmoving foundation of all true Christian teaching.

The context of this verse, and its structure, limit its application with regard to meaning. While it is undeniably true that Jesus Christ is ontologically immutable – unchanging in essence – by virtue of the fact that He is eternal God, that is not the meaning of this particular passage. This is only one of three places in Hebrews where the full name *Jesus Christi* is used by the author, signifying both His manhood and His divinely appointed office as the Messiah. Thus the ‘yesterday’ of verse 8 refers not to eternity past, nor even to the time of the Incarnation, but rather to the point in historical time when Jesus the Son of Man was declared *the Christ*. According to Peter, this acclamation came sometime around the Resurrection and the Ascension of our Lord.

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:36)

This divine declaration of Jesus as ‘Lord and Christ’ marks the moment of birth of the Gospel, the accomplishment of salvation through the finished and accepted work of Jesus Christ. Thus the unchangeableness spoken of here in regard to Jesus Christ has its most immediate application to the very teaching that was faithfully delivered by the former rulers, and is contrasted in the next verse with ‘various and strange doctrines’ that the congregation is warned not to follow. Lane comments,

Accordingly, v. 8 is not to be interpreted as an acclamation of Jesus’ timeless ontological immutability...The reference is rather to the immutability of the gospel message proclaimed by the deceased leaders in recent past. Although the preachers change, the preaching must remain the same. The unchangeableness

of the revelation is a consequence of the transcendent dignity of Jesus Christ, the originator of the preaching.⁹⁴

Thus we see verse 8 set in its proper place, not as a ‘refrigerator magnet’ verse to be pulled out of context and used inarticulately by believers, but rather as the anchor of all true and faithful Christian teaching and preaching. This explains its location between verses 7 and 9, and even to verse 17. The faithful teachers of yesterday were gone (v. 7) and the preachers of today were apparently having somewhat of a time of it with the current congregation (v. 17), due to the presence of some ‘strange doctrines’ becoming popular in their midst (v. 9). “The intent of the acclamation in v. 8 is to drive the men and women of the house church back to the foundational preaching received from their original leaders.”⁹⁵

Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them. (13:9)

This verse carries its own interpretive difficulties due to the fact that it apparently refers to ‘various and strange doctrines’ known to the Hebrew Christians at that time, but unknown to us. Other passages of the New Testament, along with the knowledge that these first century believers were converts from Judaism, help to shed some light on the quandary. For instance, we know from Paul’s letters to the Romans, Corinthians, and Colossians that there were diverse views held in the early church with regard to ‘meats’ – some allowing any and all meats to be eaten, others having scruples preventing them from partaking of some or all meats. As long as these matters were held as personal conduct, and not expanded to the point of communion, Paul treated them with some ambivalence. For instance, in Romans 14 he writes,

⁹⁴ Lane; 528.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; 530.

I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. (Romans 14:14-18)

Elsewhere, in I Corinthians, he makes allowance again for weak consciences among believers,

Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. (I Corinthians 8:4-8)

But to the churches of Colossae Paul is less forgiving, due to the fact that the issues of food and drink were becoming matters of soteriology; they were impinging upon the purity and truth of the Gospel,

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)

Each of these passages speak in terms similar to the enigmatic mention of ‘meats’ in Hebrews 13:9, and probably form sort of a backdrop within early Jewish Christianity with regard to the ancient Levitical rituals concerning food and drink and the new dispensation in Christ Jesus. But as to the exact details of the ‘various and strange doctrines’ infiltrating the Hebrew Christian

congregation in Rome, we are ignorant. Yet the meaning of the verse is not lost because of that ignorance. “The tenor of the passage is clear. The word that the former leaders proclaimed is not threatened by teaching that is inconsistent with the message the community received.”⁹⁶

The whole passage, verses 7-9, speak to the importance of sound, consistent, biblical teaching both from the standpoint of those who do the teaching – the ‘rulers’ – and from the perspective of those who hear the teaching. The congregation is to be motivated to imitate and obey those faithful rulers who delivered the unchanging word of God to them through a lifetime’s ministerial work. Furthermore, they must understand that true spiritual benefit – *the establishing of the heart*, as the author puts it – comes *only* from this type of teaching, and cannot be attained through novelties or ‘various and strange doctrines.’ The former pure teaching will strengthen the hearts of individual believers and, consequently, the very life of the congregation; the latter impure aberrations will suck the heart-life dry and leave both the individual and the community a shriveled mass.

The members of the house church are warned not to allow themselves to be led away from the foundational instruction they had received by the various configurations of competing teachings. Whenever ‘various strange teachings’ from itinerant teachers and prophets arise they must not be permitted to challenge the firm conviction of a dependence upon Jesus Christ and his high priestly ministry, as diversified and enticing as they may be.⁹⁷

The particular issues facing the Hebrew Christians of Rome in the first century may be lost us, but in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the author phrases this admonition in a way that renders the message timeless. This is what we should expect, for *Jesus Christ – yesterday and today the same – and forever.*

⁹⁶ Lane; 530.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; 532.

Week 9: Epilogue: A Religion Without an Altar

Text Reading: Hebrews 13:10 - 16

*"We have everything in the substance,
whereas they of old had only the name and shadow."
(John Owen)*

There are two things that seem to be of the very essence of religious devotion; two things that biblical Christianity lacks entirely: *an altar* and *pilgrimage*. It is apparent from even a cursory overview of religion that people have a need for a place to go and a place to offer sacrifice. Old Testament Judaism had both: the brazen altar in the tabernacle and the Temple, and the three annual feasts for which every Jewish man was to travel to Jerusalem. Even after the Diaspora Jews, when the requirements were relaxed due to the tremendous distances involved, every male Jew was still expected to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for each of the feasts at least once in his lifetime. Thus it is with Islam which, though it does not have an altar, also requires all Muslim men to travel to each of the three holiest Islamic sites – Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem – at least once in his life.

The idea of altars and holy places did not remain out of the Christian faith for very long. With the passing of the apostles and their immediate disciples, legends began to develop regarding relics – pieces of an apostle's garment, splinters from Christ's cross, a strand of Mary's hair – collected at various monastic centers to be viewed and venerated by pilgrim faithful. The awkward timing of Easter (which does not occur on the same date each year) testifies to the importance of pilgrimage in the early Church. By the year AD 325, at the First Council of Nicæa, the danger faced by pilgrims traveling the bandit-infested roads of Palestine was a matter of concern to the Emperor Constantine and to the assembled bishops of the Church. They therefore stipulated that Easter would fall on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox – so that

the roads would at least be lit (on cloudless nights, of course) by the moon. Later, during the Middle Ages prior to the Protestant Reformation, it was a matter of devotion expected of the high born – who alone could afford such a trip – to make the arduous journey to Palestine, to worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or the Church of the Nativity. Pilgrimage is not so popular among Protestants, but it still factors powerfully in the religious life of Roman Catholics.

The altar has also found its way back into the Christian religion. It was from the New Testament teaching that there was no longer any room for animal sacrifices, all such uses of the altar having been both fulfilled and abrogated by the death of Jesus Christ. Yet there still seemed to be the religious need for both sacrifice and altar, and it was not long before the theologians and pastors of the early Church were substituting a ‘bloodless’ sacrifice – the Lord’s Supper – for the bloody sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The doctrine of transubstantiation grew up around the idea – perhaps the *need* – of a Christian altar, an idea that survived the Protestant Reformation and lives on today in many Protestant churches.

This is seen in the architecture of many Protestant churches over the past five hundred years. Although the concept of the bread and wine literally becoming the body and blood of our Lord was universally repudiated among Protestant theologians, not all could tear themselves or their followers away from the altar. Thus today there is a distinctive difference in church architecture with regard to the theology of the particular denomination. The ‘altar’ churches will have the Table of Communion in the very center of the dais, with the pulpit set off to one side, indicating the primacy of the Lord’s Supper over the preaching of the Word. Reformed churches have self-consciously set the Communion Table below the pulpit, or off to a side, to indicate the subservience of the sacraments (Lord’s Supper and Baptism) to the preached Word. In the former type of church, the Lord’s Supper may be observed without any sermon or homily, it

being a self-standing sacrifice of the Christian faith. In the latter it is never to be the case that the Lord's Supper be observed apart from preaching, lest believers begin to put their trust in a ritual rather than in the 'foolishness' of the Word preached.

It is in that sense that biblical Christianity is an 'empty' religion. When the Roman general Gnaeus Pompey (Pompey the Great) sacrilegiously entered the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem - exercising the right of conquest to supersede the local deity - he was shocked to find the holiest shrine of Judaism to be an empty room. The ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, along with the other furniture of the Temple, having been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar's armies hundreds of years before. Tacitus records Pompey's experience,

Cneius Pompeius was the first of our countrymen to subdue the Jews. Availing himself of the right of conquest, he entered the temple. Thus it became commonly known that the place stood empty with no similitude of gods within, and that the shrine had nothing to reveal.⁹⁸

Of course Judaism did at one time have an altar, and the Holy of Holies was not always an empty room. But Christianity is 'empty' in the sense that it truly has no holy site, no sanctuary built by man, no altar and no place to go on pilgrimage. This in spite of the many ways that both the leaders and the followers within Christianity have tried to incorporate these common elements of all religions into the Christian faith. Yet the pull of an outwardly visible worship is still strong, as testified by the presence not only of altars, but of images within the liturgy of the Church over the centuries. People are 'comforted' by a cross hung around their neck, or a 'picture' of Jesus hanging by their front door or over their bed. The temptation to give the Christian religion some 'substance' through tangible, visible, material places or things is still strong

⁹⁸ Cornelius Tacitus; *The Histories*, Book 5, Paragraph 9.

today; it was almost irresistible to the Jewish converts to Christianity of the First Century.

Added to this milieu of religion practice and paraphernalia we have the concept of 'holy foods,' or as the apostle Paul speaks of them, 'foods sacrificed to idols.' We know that the Levitical statutes of sacrifice often stipulated who could eat which portion of the animal once the sacrifice was completed, and we know that there were some sacrifices – the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice of national atonement, for instance – of which no one was permitted to eat even a part. But beyond these Old Covenant ordinances there was both a rabbinic and a pagan element of 'holy' food – we refer to the concept now as 'kosher' – that somehow blessed the one who consumed it, allegedly 'strengthening the heart.' It is to this aspect of the visible, tangible Judaistic religion, or at least its remnants and perversions, that the author of Hebrews focuses his attention in the passage before us in this lesson. It was probably an issue particular to the religious lives of 1st Century Hebrew converts, and it was most certainly an issue within the young Christian community in Rome.

We read in Paul's Epistle to the Romans that there was a controversy raging within the believing community with regard to 'meats.' At the time the apostle counsels tolerance and acceptance, though he does not admit the validity of the doctrine of special foods or days. Paul puts his trust in the ability of the Lord Jesus Christ to sanctify His own, and to eventually strengthen the weak to an understanding that "*The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" (Rom. 14:17) Nevertheless, the issue addressed by Paul in his letter was apparently still an issue when the author of Hebrews addresses the same church; the temptation to materialize the faith through altars and foods and sacred places was still a powerful one among the Jewish believers. Those among their kin used the tangible aspects of the ancient religion to further tempt these believers into apostasy – coaxing them with a return to 'an altar' and to 'sacred foods' and to a Temple to which

pilgrimage may be made by the worshippers of Jehovah under the Mosaic religion. But all these things were soon to disappear forever from the face of the earth.

The challenge of Christianity in the 1st Century or the 21st is to maintain a true spirit of devotion without visible aids. In a sense true believers must embrace the 'emptiness' of their faith – the reality of things unseen and the temporality and transience of things visible.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (II Corinthians 4:17-18)

We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. (13:10)

As we saw in the previous lesson, verses 10-16 are sandwiched between the similar themes of verses 7-9 and 17-19. It is reasonable, therefore, to take this pericope as describing the peculiar issue that was troubling the Hebrew Christians in Rome in the middle of the 1st Century. This was apparently a teaching passing itself as orthodox, in which certain foods were considered sacred and able to spiritually strengthen those who partake of them. This follows from what the author has just stated in verse 9, prior to this current discussion of the true Christian altar.

*Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, **not with foods** which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.* (Hebrews 13:9)

In order to understand the gist of the author's argument in verses 10-16 we must be reminded as to just what it was that made certain foods more special than others. It was a phenomenon unique to the history of the early church,

although it has continued unabated in orthodox Judaism. We are referring to “*food sacrificed to idols,*” a topic of discussion in two of Paul’s letters. In the mixed society of Judaism and paganism, such as was to be found in cities like Rome and Corinth, there were two types of ‘meats’ offered for sale in the market place. Regular meats, and meats that had come from the altar of sacrifice. Jewish believers were in the greatest danger of damaging their own consciences here, due to the fact that the Old Covenant laws stipulated certain meals and foods as being holy due to their association with a prescribed sacrificial ritual in either the tabernacle or the Temple. Thus Paul writes to the Corinthians,

Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

(I Corinthians 10:18-22)

Understanding the author’s logic in this passage - which means understanding the danger faced by the Hebrew Christians to whom he is writing - requires the difficult task of trying to rebuild the social and religious situation in which these believers lived. William Lane writes of this particular verse that it is “one of the most difficult statements in Hebrews to fit into its context.”⁹⁹ There is a temptation among Protestant commentators to see the Lord’s Supper in the reference to an ‘altar’; but this would be anachronistic, since such terminology was not used with regard to the Communion table as early as this letter was written. We can, however, reconstruct the scenario in which the Hebrew Christians of Rome faced a complicated life choice with regard to their dietary practices, formerly as Jews, now as Christians. We start by noticing a gradation

⁹⁹ Lane; 537.

in the manner in which the apostle Paul deals with 'meats,' moving from tolerant indifference to outright prohibition.

In his epistle to the Roman church, Paul writes in Chapter 14 about some believers who have scruples concerning the food they eat, and others who are able to eat anything with a clear conscience. The apostle's exhortation to tolerance and acceptance seems to be proof that the 'weaker' brethren were not making their dietary practices to be of the essence of the Christian faith, theirs or anyone else's. It was probably the case that, as former Jews, they remained more comfortable in their own minds with a continued observance of the dietary laws of the Mosaic dispensation, perhaps somewhat like converted Catholics today continuing to eat fish on Fridays. Although left unstated, it is apparent that Paul desires for the weaker brethren to grow; but he considers it of greater importance that the peace of the community not be disturbed over 'food and drink.'

His tone changes, however, in his letter to the Corinthian church. In Corinth there was apparently a teaching going around with regard to 'meats sacrificed to idols' that held that the process of altar sacrifice infused something sacred into the food. Paul gave no credence to the content of the teaching, maintaining that idols are nothing and nothing for the believer to be afraid of. The whole phenomenon may have been a clever marketing ploy by the meat vendors to justify charging a premium for the leftovers from the ritual sacrifices. In any event, however, there were believers whose consciences were influenced by this errant doctrine; to them the eating of such meats signified a sacrilegious act of worship to the idol. For their sake, therefore, Paul admonishes the Christians at Corinth to forego eating meats sacrificed to idols.

We now come back to Rome, where it appears these two situations had combined in the years since Paul wrote his epistle. There were 'strange and diverse' teachings with regard to foods having spiritual and sanctifying powers, but evidently these were not meats purchased from the pagan foodcourt. The oblique reference made by the author of Hebrews is to the Jewish altar – the altar

of the tabernacle or of the Temple – and to the various legitimate sacrifices under the Old Covenant wherein the remainder of the sacrificial animal was to be eaten by the priests, the supplicant, or the community as a whole. It does not appear that these teachers were Judaizers – they were not making this dietary doctrine a condition of salvation, as the Judaizers did their emphasis on circumcision. Nonetheless, the force of their teaching was injurious in and of itself, in producing a false system of spiritual discipline, and was prone to exacerbate the temptation to return to Mosaic Judaism.

There can be little doubt here that the writer's allusion is to Jewish regulations which were being commended at Rome as an aid to faith, and that the propaganda owed the strength of its appeal, in the last resort, to the association of these ritual regulations with the cultus of the past.¹⁰⁰

It is to this latter point the author addresses himself most directly, once again emphasizing that believers in Jesus Christ already *have* an altar, and one of which unbelievers may not participate. Lane comments, "the whole burden of Hebrews can be epitomized in two resounding '*we have*:' we *have* a high priest, we *have* an altar: sanctuary and sacrifice are ours."¹⁰¹ Once again the author repudiates those who would encourage a return to Moses and to Old Covenant Judaism, not by tearing down what God had established at that time, but rather by showing that Christians now have something better – immeasurably better. We have an altar that is not only inaccessible to the Jewish priesthood, but is alone efficacious in dispensing true grace to strengthen the heart (13:9).

Just what is the 'altar' of Christianity? If we think back to the opening discussion with regard to the importance of the altar to most religions and to the religious spirit in general, it might seem as though Christianity itself must have a visible altar in order to strengthen and encourage its adherents. This was and remains the argument in favor of treating the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice, and

¹⁰⁰ Manson, William; *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1966); 150.

¹⁰¹ Lane; 537.

the Table as an altar. There is a certain plausibility to this line of reasoning, drawing as it does from Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians. The parallel with Hebrews 13 are evident, for it is in the very context of 'meats sacrificed to idols' that the apostle also writes,

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

(I Corinthians 10:14-17)

There is, therefore, a connection between the sacrifices of the Old Testament of which the worshippers shared in the meat, and the observance of the Lord's Supper within the Christian community. But the connection is that as between shadow and substance, type and antitype. The error of sacramentalism, whether Romish or Protestant, is in the notion that the sacrifice of Christ is to be repeated as were the sacrifices under the Old Covenant. If one gleans nothing more from the Book of Hebrews, he must at least comprehend that the author speaks consistently of Christ's *once for all* sacrifice. And it is of that sacrifice – that altar – that he speaks again here in Chapter 13.

For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. (13:11-12)

The author throws us a twist here, and it requires careful reading to catch it. The previous verses lead us to think of the 'meat sacrificed to idols' and to the tender consciences in things concerning meats of which the apostle Paul writes in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians. But the author of Hebrews goes beyond even the Mosaic sacrifices in which what is left of the animal was to be eaten either by the priests, by the one presenting the offering, or by the whole community. He speaks of a sacrifice of which *nothing* was to be eaten; *nothing*

was to remain. This was the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice – the national atonement offering given up once every year during the third annual feast.

This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever. (Leviticus 16:29-31)

The procedure for the Atonement offering is as specific as all the others – the priest must first make atonement for his own sins and the sins of his family, and then offer up another animal for the sins of the nation. Afterward, however, the carcass of the sacrificial animals were not to be cooked and eaten. Rather,

The bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, shall be carried outside the camp. And they shall burn in the fire their skins, their flesh, and their offal. Then he who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. (Leviticus 16:27-28)

The reference made by the author of Hebrews is unmistakable, and by it we must understand that the ‘altar’ of Christianity cannot be the table of communion, for of that meal all believers are invited to partake. By connecting the disposal of bodies of the Atonement sacrifices *outside the walls* of the city (or beyond the boundaries of the tabernacle) with the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ *outside the gate*, the author shows us that the Christian altar is Golgotha, the Cross. The Day of Atonement was repeated once every year for the obvious reason that it could not bring to pass that which it signified: the complete forgiveness and cleansing from all sin. Christians must understand that the very concept of an altar speaks of atonement, and any continuing ‘Christian’ altar must by definition proclaim the continuing need for atonement. But this is to trample underfoot the precious blood of Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial and

atonement death on the Cross fully accomplished that which the annual *Yom Kippur* offerings merely shadowed.

Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross not only fulfilled the intention of the Levitical arrangement but superseded it by accomplishing the sanctification that the old order called for but could not effect.¹⁰²

It is for this reason that any notion of an altar or a sacrifice associated with the Lord's Supper is and ought to be repugnant to evangelicals. The Roman Catholic priest offering up the elements of the Eucharist in a bloodless repetition of Christ's *once for all* sacrifice of Himself at Golgotha, is a travesty of biblical Christianity and an offense to the all-sufficient blood of our Redeemer. And just as the Old Covenant Jews had to bear the reproach of the pagans for worshipping a God who had no image, and for focusing the energy of their devotion to an empty room, so also Christians must bear the reproach of unbelievers for embracing a religion without an altar, a faith devoid of holy places, a very un-religious religion if ever there was one in the world. Although the passage has peculiar application to the situation in which the Hebrew believers found themselves, in the midst of the unbelieving Jewish community of Rome, the principles inculcated here are timeless and echo down through the ages to anyone who seeks to resurrect the rituals of Judaism in the guise of Christian worship.

Those who continue to frame their conduct by the cultic arrangements of the old covenant are excluded from the benefits that Christians enjoy, which result from the fulfillment of the atonement ritual in Jesus' death on Golgotha.¹⁰³

The author makes, once again, a passing reference to the practice of Mosaic Judaism as if it were still on-going, still being done at the Temple in Jerusalem. There is no sense here that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant

¹⁰² Lane; 538.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; 540.

dispensation had ended, for that would have presented the author with an easy out – simply showing that God had passed on from the Mosaic to the New Covenant, manifested by His abandonment of the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system. Yet there is a tone of foreboding in the author’s words, a sense in which the continuing practices of the Aaronic priesthood were not only *passé*, but were idolatrous. Delitzsch writes provocatively, “The whole expression seems purposely to have an idolatrous air about it, and somewhat of the contemptuous or depreciating tone.”¹⁰⁴ But the abandonment of Mosaic Judaism was already predicted by the Lord, and has been alluded to already by the writher of Hebrews. It is what is to be expected now that God’s final *word* has come.

After the Servant of God had suffered ‘without’ on Golgotha, and had been consumed in the fire of which Isaiah speaks (ch. 50:11), God withdrew His will and favor from the legal sacrificial cultus: there are still, indeed, sacrifices which are well-pleasing to God, but only the sacrifices of a thankful confession and of a love active in good works, offered up on the foundation of the one all-sufficient atonement which we owe to Him, the Father of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁵

Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. (13:13-14)

Here is the true Christian pilgrimage: not to a holy *place* that can be physically visited, but rather to Jesus Christ, who remains *outside the gate*. In a manner similar to the Christian ‘altar,’ believers also have a place of pilgrimage that corresponds to the physical city of Jerusalem, only the Christian’s holy city is not worldly. “The members of the assembly are called to recognize that true sacred space will not be found in Jerusalem, with its impermanent sanctuary and

¹⁰⁴ Delitzsch; 386.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*; 391-92.

altar, but in the presence of Jesus and in the anticipation of the qualitatively different city to which they have come and are coming (12:22-24)."¹⁰⁶

Thus we find that Christianity is not without those two essential features of religion – the altar and the holy place – it is simply without the temporal, physical shadow and type of those things; it possesses the reality to which all other religions, to lesser or greater degree, approximate. “This world never did, nor ever will, give a state of rest and satisfaction unto believers – It will not afford them a city.”¹⁰⁷ The Christian has the same attitude and enthusiasm as the pilgrim on his way up to Jerusalem, or the Catholic penitent climbing Pilate’s Staircase in Rome, or the Muslim circling the Ka’ba at Mecca – expectation of grace, divine favor from the Lord. Only the Christian understands that no place on earth can any longer offer what he seeks; still he presses on, continuing that pilgrimage which is his entire life. “Pilgrimage is impelled by an earnest sense of expectancy, which allows no relaxation of the commitment to the vision of the city of God.”¹⁰⁸

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (13:15-16)

If it is a mistake for Christians to materialize the altar and holy place of their faith (and it is), then it is also a mistake to the opposite end of the spectrum to consider that Christianity possesses no continuing sacrifice. Yet the order of Christian sacrifice is as it has always been – first *atonement*, then *peace*, then *thanksgiving*. The deficiency of Cain’s offering – aside from the fact that it was offered apart from faith – was that it was a *peace offering* without the attending and prerequisite *sin offering*. So it continued under the Mosaic dispensation – the Israelite had no business offering to Jehovah the *peace* or *thank offerings* until the

¹⁰⁶ Lane; 546-47.

¹⁰⁷ Owen; 451.

¹⁰⁸ Lane; 547.

sin offering had been made. One does not approach a holy God apart from the shed blood of atonement.

That offering has been made by and in Jesus Christ, *once for all* and never to be repeated (even 'bloodlessly'). Now the believer has both the privilege and the duty to offer the consequent sacrifices of praise and good works. The "*fruit of lips that give praise*" is a clear reference to the prophecy of Hosea, showing that the offering of thanksgiving and praise was always to be a major aspect of true worship.

*O Israel, return to the LORD your God,
For you have stumbled because of your iniquity;
Take words with you, and return to the LORD.
Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity;
Receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices^a of our lips.* (Hosea 14:1-2)

Thus the author of Hebrews summarizes briefly, yet comprehensively, the 'sacrificial' duties of the believer. "Here it pertains to one's total conduct before God and covers both personal piety and corporate responsibility."¹⁰⁹ Since the believer has been both forgiven and washed in and by the blood of atonement, Jesus' sacrifice *outside the gate*, his altar and his holy city are always present, though not yet visible. There is, therefore, no need to travel to the 'Holy Land,' or to a shrine - or even to a church building - in order to offer up appropriate and acceptable sacrifices to God. "The sacrifices under the law had their times and places prescribed unto them, out of which they were not accepted; but as unto this of ours, every time and place is equally approved."¹¹⁰

The message of Hebrews 13:10-16 remains as valid today as it was twenty centuries ago, though the circumstances of our walk are completely different from those of the Hebrew Christians in Rome of the 1st Century. Modern believers still seek altars and holy places, still pretend to a repetitious and

¹⁰⁹ Lane; 553.

¹¹⁰ Owen; 456.

sanctifying offering on the Table of Communion, and still travel to the 'Holy Land' seeking rest that cannot be found there. The author of Hebrews does not deny that Christians have an altar and a holy place; he simply repudiates the materialization of those things - the putting forward of the shadow and type, to the detriment of the substance. Our altar is Golgotha, and our holy city the heavenly Jerusalem.

What then? Are we to offer no sacrifice? Very far from it. We are called upon to offer to God a continual sacrifice. Instead of presenting in the morning and the evening a sacrifice of lambs, and on certain holy days bringing bullocks and sheep to be slain, we are to present to God continually the sacrifice of praise. Having done with the outward, we now give ourselves entirely to the inward and to the spiritual. Do you see your calling, brethren?¹¹¹

Selah

¹¹¹ Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*; Volume 34; 565.

Week 10: Epilogue: A Clear Conscience**Text Reading: Hebrews 13:17 - 19**

“So the overseers are to commend themselves to every man’s conscience, and to rule by the Word of God.”
(James Haldane)

With verse 17 we have reached the second bookend of this particular section of Hebrews 13, and with verse 19 essentially the end of the both the epilogue and the epistle. The author ends his writing with a final exhortation to stay the course, to remain firm in the faith, and to hold fast not only the confession of that faith, but also the community of that faith. As we saw in our review of verses 7-9, he brackets this pericope with exhortations both to remember those rulers who effectively instructed the community in the Word of God in the past, and to obey those rulers who were then following in their footsteps. What is notable about the passage before us in this lesson is that the author includes himself in the latter group, giving one final justification for his authority to speak, to be heard, and to be obeyed.

Although the passage is clearly directed to the congregation there is a powerful indirect message to the leaders as well. What is implicit in verses 17-19 speaks as loudly as what is explicit: the duty of a true overseer of God’s flock is solemn; its faithful discharge arduous; and the resources at his disposal relatively weak, humanly speaking. By bringing into view his own situation, the author also reminds the leaders of the Christian assembly that their practice must fall in line with their preaching. The wording reminds us of the self-defense passages in the letters written by the apostle Paul, and the terminology often leads scholars to assume therefore that Hebrews was written by Paul. But the need to defend one’s teaching and practice is a common feature of the pastor’s life, for he is called more especially not only to preach the narrow way, but to walk it as well.

Our hypothesis with regard to the *Sitz im Leben* of the Hebrews – their ‘situation in life’ – is that they were adopting a middle road approach to their ethnic Jewishness and their professed Christianity. This *via media* was meant to turn down the heat of persecution coming from their ‘brethren according to the flesh,’ in the hopes of avoiding a renewed pogrom from the Roman authorities. In a word, they were tempted to compromise their confession in order to preserve their condition. The man of God who is called to pastor the community of faith must forever oppose such a compromising path, knowing that it can only lead to apostasy and final destruction. The way of compromise is nothing less than just another lane in the ‘wide road’ on which the world travels to hell. It would be a mistake for us to neglect this message just because the temptation before these Hebrew Christians was of a different cultural variety than the one which we face. In every age Christians have been drawn to compromise with the world, and there has always been a large section of the professing church in which that compromise is being lived out.

What is it that keeps the believer from inching his path ever closer to that of the world? The Word of God. A consistent diet of Scripture instills in the believer’s heart a clear awareness of the dramatic difference between the ways of the world and the Way, and of the danger of shifting the latter path into the channel of the former. Delitzsch writes of the remnant of faithful believers among the Hebrew Christian community, that they worried about the integrity of their church, “the more clearly they perceive the perilous character of the mode of life and thought produced by that middle course between Judaism and Christianity pursued by the majority.”¹¹² And the perception of that peril comes from nowhere but the Word of God, faithfully preached, faithfully read, and faithfully lived. Foremost among the community, it is the responsibility of the overseers to steadfastly discharge these three duties in the presence of the flock.

¹¹² Delitzsch; 394.

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (13:17)

It may seem as though the modern church has wholly succumbed to the entertainment fever that infects our modern culture. Men are no longer sought out for the pulpits of our churches on the basis of their biblical knowledge, their theological acumen, and their ability to preach and teach the Word of God. In many seminaries courses on marketing are replacing as requisites for study courses on Hebrew and Greek, due to the fact that the graduates of these seminaries want to be hired by modern American churches. And congregations want to be entertained, to be comforted and amused, to be told that the way they are living life is exactly the right way, and they want to be further encouraged that theirs is the right way manifested by more and more people coming to their church. This is the megachurch phenomenon, but it is anything but new.

Paul warned Timothy that in “*these last days*” – which so far have stretched from the first century to the twenty-first – would see people gathering to themselves men who will scratch their “*itching ears*” and for this very reason Timothy was to be ready “*in season and out,*”

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (II Timothy 4:2-5)

What is remarkable about this tendency of congregations to abandon sound doctrine in favor of fables, is that no congregation ever thinks that they have done this. The megachurch proclaims its faithfulness to the Gospel, the ‘purpose-driven’ church claims alone to be fulfilling true Christian ministry, the rationalistic mainline denominational church is honoring God by honoring His

highest creation, man. The excuses are endless. It is as if Paul's prophecy has never come true, when in reality it is epidemic in every single age of the church.

The beginning of the movement away from sound doctrine and toward ear-scratching fables is an abandonment of the centrality and absolute necessity of preaching for both the salvation of sinners and the sanctification of saints. Times really have not changes all that much since the Greco-Roman world that Paul knew.

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (I Corinthians 1:20-25)

Now, as then, professing believers have sought to be wiser than God, and have incorporated the wisdom of the world into the life of the church. It should not surprise us that exegetical and theological preaching is not popular today; it never really was popular. It was, is, and always will be foolishness to man, even men who professed to be saved. But in it lies the health and security of the true congregation of faith, and the pastor who holds fast to this truth will usually trod a very lonely path in this life. Both sides of the issue are addressed here in one verse - both the challenge to the congregation and the admonition to the pastor.

On the congregational side there is a tacit admission as to where a pastor's trouble usually arises. It is not from the unbelieving world, really. First, opposition from that quarter is expected by the overseer of God's flock, just as the attacks of lions upon the sheep was expected by the shepherd. One guards against the dangers one expects, and prepares himself for the attack. Such attacks can indeed be exhausting, and even fatal, but they are ultimately not discouraging. Military chronicles speak of the almost irrational exhilaration that

attends the soldier in the midst of battle – a ‘war fever’ it is sometimes called: that flood of adrenalin that stimulates all of the senses and channels all of the energy toward the battle at hand. This is the Christian pastor in conflict with the heretic, the militant unbeliever, the ‘gainsayer’ against Christ. The weapons of our warfare may not be carnal, but they are real and sharp, and they require maintenance and learned skill in their use. This is what the pastor does in his study: stocks his armory with all manner of spiritual weaponry; hones the edges of his spiritual sword; practices with both the lance and the shield in the lists of his theology books. It is not discouraging for a well-trained soldier to engage the enemy in battle; in fact, it is discouraging when such conflict never arises – when the sword never leaves its sheathe.

No, the real discouragement for the overseer of God’s flock is when the opposition comes from the sheep themselves. This is mutiny, betrayal, the abandonment of those who are on the front lines by those who wish to be armchair generals. The author of Hebrews is undoubtedly a pastor; he at least knows the sense of frustration and failure that comes upon the pastor when the flock refuses to follow. Now it is presumed here that the shepherds are leading in the right direction; that is established by the author in verse 7 and is to be carried into verse 17. “No other grounding and safeguarding of the position of the community leaders is provided than the authority that derives from the word of preaching.”¹¹³ Nowhere is the believer admonished to blind obedience, but rather commended as the noble Bereans when he “*searches the Scriptures to see that these things be true.*”

But true biblical teaching is reproofing at least as much as it is comforting. The process of “*washing by the water of the word*” ought to be as gentle as the overseer can make it, but in the end it is necessary that it remove some dirt. John Brown says of the pastor,

¹¹³ Lane; 554.

He may urge on you an unpalatable truth – he may offer sharp reproofs; but recollect he has no choice; remember he is ‘a man under authority.’ Put the question, Has he said anything that Christ has not said? If he has, disregard him; if he has not, blame him not, - he has but discharged his duty to his Master and to you...If he had been appointed to amuse you, ‘to speak smooth things’ to you, you might reasonably find fault with him for his uncompromising statements and his keen rebukes. But he ‘watches for your souls.’ Your spiritual improvement, your everlasting salvation, is his object.¹¹⁴

And by the characteristic of the Word as a two-edged sword, the admonition to the congregation to obey their leaders is at the same time an exhortation to the leaders to be men worthy of obedience. Even John Brown’s words probably pierce deeper into the mind and heart of the pastor who reads them than the congregant. *“He watches for you souls...as one who must give an account.”* One wonders, really, at whom verse 17 is ultimately directed, the member of the assembly or the leader? The member hears one thing (if he has ears to hear): the faithful preaching of the Word is my spiritual health and salvation, therefore I must attend upon it and obey it. The pastor hears another thing: the spiritual welfare of the flock is my only concern, the stewardship entrusted to me by God, I must discharge that trust earnestly and faithfully, for I will give an account of my stewardship before my Master. Again John Brown,

The spiritual improvement, the everlasting salvation of their people, is their great object; and to gain this great object, they *watch*...They occupy a place of trust: they have not only been called by their people, but they have been commissioned by their Lord.¹¹⁵

Owens adds,

The work and design of these rulers is solely to take care of your souls, - by all means to preserve them from evil, sin, backsliding; to instruct and feed them; to promote their faith and obedience; that they may be led safely to eternal life.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Brown; 710.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*; 709.

¹¹⁶ Owen; 465.

Verse 17 hits hard on both sides – urging obedience on the part of the congregant and faithfulness on the part of the leader. But once again we are faced with the reality that the relationship between the pastor and the flock is that of teacher to disciple, and not of civil ruler to citizen. The pastor may ‘lay down the law’ (so long as it is God’s law faithfully delivered), but he may not enforce that law by any other means than persuasion and example.

The authority given by the Lord to the bishops or elders of the churches of Christ is altogether different from the authority with which civil rulers are invested. The authority of the spiritual ruler is to be maintained by instruction and persuasion, and is not to be enforced by civil pains and penalties.¹¹⁷

The author of Hebrews knows this fact, and thus has sought to corral these wayward Hebrew Christians back into the fold through one of the most thoroughly argued and eloquently stated sermons ever given. He, and the overseer of the Christian flock, has but one more weapon in his arsenal: his own example.

Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably. (13:19)

There is a certain respect that attaches to a man who lives according to his principles, even if those principles are not shared. Maybe because we are so used to the ‘do as I say, not as I do’ routine, that when someone comes along who actually tries to hold himself to the same standard he holds for others, we are refreshingly astonished. So respected is the concept of ‘practicing what you preach’ that it is often used as a defense, not necessarily for the *truth* of what one preaches, but at least for the *sincerity* with which it is preached. One sin the Christian pastor must assiduously avoid throughout his life is the sin of hypocrisy.

¹¹⁷ Haldane; 392.

For the Christian minister such a clear conscience – of which the author to the Hebrews is *confident* that he has, a tacit admission of the ability of man to deceive himself – cannot rest merely on sincerity. It must also be grounded in truth and practice. Too many modern believers have ‘peace in their hearts’ about the course of their lives, without reference to the directing and reproofing Word of God. The very phrase ‘peace in my heart’ ought to be excised from the Christian vernacular until the modern church once again attains to some functional biblical literacy, in order that we may know upon what true peace is grounded. For the Christian minister a clear conscience cannot derive from anything less than the faithful discharge of his duty as a teacher of God’s Word and a shepherd of God’s flock. Through the course of his pastoral ministry, the author of Hebrews grew *confident* that he had met this standard. Every pastor ought to be able to echo Paul’s words to the Corinthian church,

For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. (II Corinthians 1:12)

“One of the best methods of enforcing our recommendations of duties to others, is to exemplify them ourselves.”¹¹⁸ The goal of a clear conscience is not one for the pastor only; all believers ought to value it over any other achievement in life. And the regenerate will can be at peace only to the extent that it is in conformity to the will of God, both in thought and in deed.

A good conscience is one which testifies to the agreement of our moral conduct with God’s law written in our hearts, and with His revealed will, - a conscience which, so far from accusing us, bids us take comfort, as regards God, on the ground of His mercy, and as regards human judgment, on the ground of our just conduct.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Brown; 713.

¹¹⁹ Delitzsch; 396.

But I especially urge you to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. (13:19)

This verse refers to the author's request for prayer in verse 18, and indicates also that whoever he may have been, he possessed an intimate relationship with the original recipients of his letter that was borne of his having lived amongst them at one time. If we can establish that the Hebrew Christian congregation was in Rome, then we have also probably established (again) that the author of this epistle was not Paul. Piecing together the biblical strands of Paul's life, we know of his desire to visit Rome from his epistle to the Romans, and of his eventual travels to Rome as a prisoner for the Gospel. But from the time of his house arrest in Rome the voice of the apostle goes silent. If he was released from that first imprisonment - as the ancient writers all attest, though without any verifiable details - we have no subsequent writings from his pen.¹²⁰

The statement in verse 19 comes from someone who knew and was known by the Hebrew Christians in Rome; probably from someone who ministered among them for an extended period of time, and wishes to do so again. The obstacle to his return seems to be tied up with allegations that his teachings or his conduct, or both together, were less than commendable. Perhaps he was suffering the same calumny that the apostle Paul experienced from some within the Corinthian congregation when he was not there. Throughout the second epistle to that church, the apostle defends himself against the false charges and slanders that were circulating among the congregation.

"For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present. For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. (II Corinthians 10:10-12)

¹²⁰ It is postulated that II Timothy was written by the apostle during a second and final imprisonment in Rome. While this may or may not be true, it does not affect the argument concerning his alleged authorship of Hebrews.

As it was in Corinth, so also in Rome, and so often in many churches in our day: pastors reduced to foolish defense of their preaching, their conduct, their integrity, their calling by rebellious congregations whose refusal to obey their leaders is tantamount to a refusal to follow God. If they succeed in undermining the subjective authority, or even securing the dismissal, of faithful rulers whom God has set over His flock, the result will be the experience of rebellious Israel, who *“sowed the wind, and reaped the whirlwind.”*

Week 11: Epilogue: Benediction

Text Reading: Hebrews 13:20 - 21

*"All grace is from Him,
and therefore all glory is to be ascribed to Him."
(John Owen)*

Modern church services have grown much less formal, less 'liturgical' in the more traditional sense of that word, over the past generation. One of the common features of the Christian worship service no longer experienced is the benediction. To many the invocation and the benediction seem too 'Roman Catholic' or 'Puritan,' too stodgy and lacking in spontaneity. It is a sad loss for Christian worship, for the benediction is a very biblical component of true worship. A benediction is, simply, a prayer for divine blessing – something that all believers should desire who realize that *"apart from Me you can do nothing"* and that *"in me dwells no good thing."* The benediction is the congregation's acknowledgement that even the power of God's Word is impotent without the power of God's Spirit. The removal of the benediction from many modern Christian services may make their worship more 'modern' and 'spontaneous,' but it deprives believers of both the realization and the reality of God's gracious assistance in the application of His Word toward sanctification.

There are quite a number of benedictions in the Bible which, along with the generous scatterings of doxology, form the living responsiveness of the Word of God to the Spirit of God. The Scriptures are, in a manner of speaking, *responsive reading* material: one cannot properly treat them merely as objective revelation without the subjective response. Perhaps the greatest example of the benediction in response to the magnitude of God's divine work of salvation is here in Hebrews 13, and that of the doxology in Romans 11. In the latter passage the apostle Paul unfolds the mysterious purpose of God with regard to the

nation of Israel and the salvation of the entirety of the elect, when he fairly erupts in humble praise,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

“For who has known the mind of the LORD?

Or who has become His counselor?”

“Or who has first given to Him

And it shall be repaid to him?”

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

(Romans 11:33-36)

One characteristic of this doxology, shared also with the benediction before us in Hebrews 13:20-21, is the usage of either explicit biblical quotations, or clear Scriptural allusions. The benediction is not a product of man’s imagination; it is not merely a pastor praying divine blessing upon the assembly in his own, perhaps eloquent words. That would be to make the benediction simply another human prayer – not to denigrate prayer, nor to diminish the importance of personal involvement and thought in the formulation of prayer. Prayer is both the expression of a man’s heart and mind in response to the unfolding of divine revelation, and the conforming of that same man’s mind and heart to the will of God. But the benediction is different: it is the act of ‘reminding God’ of the utter need of His people for His blessing.

*On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; All day and all night they will never keep silent. You who **remind** the Lord, take no rest for yourselves. (Isaiah 62:6)*

When we remind someone of something, we repeat to him the very words first spoken. In the same sense, in the benediction, the congregation and the shepherd together ‘remind’ God of His promise to bless and keep His people, to sanctify and save them, to nourish and protect them, to complete the work within them that He has begun. The ‘grandfather’ of all benedictions is also the most basic statement of all that any benediction seeks,

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

"The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,

And give you peace."

(Numbers 6:22-26)

This is the Aaronic Benediction that has called upon and given divine blessing to countless generation of faithful Jews and devout Christians for over three thousand years. It is hard to improve upon this one; but the fulfillment of that Covenant under which the Aaronic Benediction was first inculcated does indeed call for an advancement upon it with regard to content. Yet all benedictions, whether from the Old Testament or the New, bring about the same result as did the Aaronic Benediction: *"So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them"* (Numbers 6:27).

There are numerous benedictions and doxologies in the New Testament, which should cause no wonder considering the majesty of the revealed Lord of Glory under the New Covenant, and the magnitude of the salvation He has affected. Some benedictions are 'short and to the point,' lacking overt theological content, though the placing of the Name of God is ever present even so,

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

(II Corinthians 13:14)

Other benedictions continue the didactic thrust of the epistle to which they are attached; they carry on the theological current established in what has gone before,

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith – to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.

(Romans 16:25-27)

Not all benedictions are to be found at the end of the epistle or sermon; the benediction sometimes arises (as does the doxology) at the point when the realization of the need for divine intercession and blessing is most acute,

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

The benediction from II Corinthians quoted above is clearly trinitarian, but while this is most certainly a central and nonnegotiable tenet of the Christian faith, it is not an indispensable feature of the Christian benediction,

Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Galatians 6:18)

Peace to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen. (Ephesians 6:23-24)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (I Timothy 1:17; technically a doxology)

In all of these biblical examples, and in all that are not mentioned here, there is the common feature of uniting the heart of the worshiper with the God of his comfort and strength. The author of Hebrews earlier reminds us of that free access that all believers now have to the “*throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” (Hebrews 4:16) The benediction is the congregation’s prayer before that throne, containing within itself the answer of blessing – the mercy and grace asked for by God’s people. And if the Aaronic Benediction is the greatest such prayer under the Old Covenant, then the benediction of Hebrews 13:20-12 is the greatest under the New Covenant. But in truth, the countenance of God shining upon His people is nothing less than God

making us complete in every good thing to do His will, and the two benedictions seek one and the same thing.

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, 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. (13:20-21)

It seems wrong to dissect a prayer. In seminary homiletics courses the sermons of the students are subsequently critiqued, an exercise that seems almost sacrilegious. Perhaps it is not so much to prepare the student to preach, but to prepare the preacher for the critique he will inevitably suffer from his congregation! Be that as it may, sermons and prayers are conversations – and most people realize that it is bad form to critique and dissect a conversation. The sermon is God speaking to His people through His minister and His Word; the prayer of benediction is God’s minister beseeching His divine blessing upon that Word and upon His people. Both are solemn acts of worship, meaningless outside the context of devotion; neither should be critiqued without solemn reserve.

But the sermon is preached by a fallible man, and is therefore susceptible to criticism (and, hopefully, improvement). And the benediction is a portion of God’s Word, and is thus susceptible to exegesis. Nonetheless, it seems proper to keep the benediction together as a unit – as a complete thought and prayer – rather than to separate the verses for distinct analysis. Therefore we will view the benediction here at the close of Hebrews in the broadest of strokes, seeking to imbibe the comprehensiveness of the prayer through the entirety of the words, rather than to micro-analyze the component parts.

The One to whom the prayer is addressed is, of course, *God*. It is His aid that is needed if any professing believer is to remain firm unto the end, and His ‘qualification’ for being trusted in that work is here given: “*who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead.*” God it was who would “*not allow Thy Holy One to see*

decay,” but faithfully received the self-immolation, so to speak, of the Sacrifice and proclaimed His approbation through the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates God’s decisive intervention by which he acknowledged and ratified the cross of Christ as the means of the redemption of the human family.¹²¹

The faithfulness of God to His people culminates in His sending His Son – faithful to the promise of a Messiah – and in His acceptance of the self-sacrifice of that Messiah on behalf of the sins of His people. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is indeed a great source of hope for believers, but fundamentally it is the *imprimatur* of God upon the finished work of the Savior. “He proclaimed with His dying breath that the work of redemption was completed, and the Father set His seal to the declaration when He raised Him from the dead.”¹²² This understanding of the significance of the resurrection is the essential teaching of the apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Romans,

*Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was **raised because of our justification.***
(Romans 4:23-25)

The Old Testament promise with regard to the One who would take away the sins of His people, was that His heavenly Father would not abandon Him to the grave. We understand that death had no dominion over a sinless Jesus, but we often allow that truth to cloud our apprehension of what Jesus’ resurrection means *to us*. The death of Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, the spilling of the *blood of the eternal covenant*, as the benediction states. But until the death of Jesus, all previous sacrifices remained dead – and some were graphically consumed in fire as a sober reminder to the people of the deep hue of their sin. None had ever

¹²¹ Lane; 561.

¹²² Haldane; 396.

come alive again, and it was to be taken purely by faith in the revealed promise that God was satisfied by the offering. The lack of any visible acknowledgment of divine approval and acceptance of the sacrifice was made even more poignant by the continuously repetitive nature of those sacrifices, a point established earlier by the writer in Hebrews. Under the Old Covenant system, God had not yet acknowledged Himself *satisfied* as to the righteous requirements of His offended holiness and law.

Christ, as the great shepherd of the sheep, was brought into the state of death by the sentence of the law; and was thence led, recovered and restored, by the God of peace...The law being fulfilled and answered, the sheep being redeemed by the death of the shepherd, the God of peace, to evidence that peace was now perfectly made, by an act of sovereign authority brings him again into the state of life, in a complete deliverance from the charge of the law.¹²³

This speaks to the forensic aspect of justification, ratified powerfully through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is certainly a testimony to His sinless perfection and utter majesty in holiness, yes, and to the full satisfaction that Christ brought to the claims of the Law. But it is also the most powerful way that God now speaks His love and acceptance to those who are in Christ. *“Now may God, who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead...”*

This blood also extinguished God’s wrath, set free God’s love, and founded an altered relation between God and man – a relation of eternal fellowship of love.¹²⁴

The backdrop to this wonderful benediction, appropriate to the Hebrew Christian audience to which it was first delivered, is the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt through the Sea. The language of our benediction breathes the language of Isaiah,

¹²³ Owen; 475.

¹²⁴ Delitzsch; 400

Then he remembered the days of old,
 Moses and his people, saying:
 *"Where is He who brought them up out of the sea
 With the shepherd of His flock?
 Where is He who put His Holy Spirit within them,
 Who led them by the right hand of Moses,
 With His glorious arm, dividing the water before them
 To make for Himself an everlasting name,
 Who led them through the deep,
 As a horse in the wilderness, that they might not stumble?"* (Isaiah 63:11-13)

Even in this final benediction, the author of Hebrews compares Jesus favorably to Moses, showing the former to be a greater Shepherd of the sheep than the latter. Moses' role as the Shepherd of God's people was mediated through the insufficient blood of the animal sacrifices under the Old Covenant. Jesus' assumption of the mantle of Shepherd of God's flock is by and through the shedding of His own blood, the *blood of the eternal covenant*.

This blood is the blood of an everlasting covenant by which He has sealed His claim to the sheep, has proved His faithfulness and acquired for them God's eternal love...All His greatness and glory are now applied by Him for the pasture and eternal exaltation of His flock.¹²⁵

The author of Hebrews has sternly exhorted his audience to perseverance, steadfastness, continued devotion to their profession of faith in the Messiah, the true Shepherd of God's flock. But he does not for one moment think that this steadfastness is within the grasp of any believer by mere exercise of willpower or discipline. Therefore the benediction prays for the one thing most needful in order that professing believers (in all ages and places) not fall away, but rather *"run with endurance the race that is set"* before them. Lane writes, "human effort can never be independent of God, who molds the life of his servants into conformity to his will."¹²⁶ Lest anyone come away from the Epistle to the

¹²⁵ Delitzsch; 400-401.

¹²⁶ Lane; 565.

Hebrews thinking that he must 'tough it out' for the Lord, we are all thrown back on the biblical truth, "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion unto the day of Jesus Christ.*" (Phil. 1:6) This benediction is part of the biblical foundation of the Reformed doctrine of *Perseverance of the Saints*. That doctrine was never meant to teach a bland 'once saved always saved' without regard to *perfection, maturity, completion* in accordance with God's will. Such a 'perseverance' is devoid of that holiness for which believers were caused to be numbered in Christ before the foundation of the world. No, true biblical perseverance entails *perfect conformity to the will of God* - conformity to the very nature of Christ Jesus. This is in keeping with Paul's expectation with regard to the Corinthian believers,

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (I Corinthians 1:4-9)

And even more succinctly stated by the same apostle to the Philippians,

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

There is both hope and humility joined together in this wonderful benediction. The sure hope that God is faithful, who did not allow His Holy One to see decay and will not allow those sheep that He has entrusted into Christ's care perish, either. Whereas the Hebrew believer may be reminded in these words of what God had done through Moses, all believers are reminded of those words of our Lord wherein He announces what He will do,

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:11-16; 27-29)

Yet with this steadfast hope is the humbling fact that our effort is never sufficient – though always necessary. All that is good done within us and through us is *through Jesus Christ*. “The meaning is, that the best of our duties, wrought in us by the grace of God, are not accepted as they are ours, but upon the account of the merit and mediate of Christ...All grace is from him, and therefore all glory is to be ascribed to him.”¹²⁷ Thus a benediction, and a doxology: “...to Whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

¹²⁷ Owen; 479, 480.

Week 12: Final Salutations

Text Reading: Hebrews 13:22 - 25

*"It hath no name prefixed;
therefore we may by as good reason say,
it was written by no man,
as not by Paul."
(Jerome)*

The last few verses of the Book of Hebrews have been combed to within an inch of their life in an effort to glean the authorship and place of origination from what is contained there. In truth, however, commentators have not always seen the intrinsic connection between the two pieces of data – the origination and authorship – and most have assumed one and thence sought to deduce the other. As there is no theological content to speak of in verses 22-25, at least nothing that in any way adds to the momentous theological tome that has preceded, we will rather plow over the same ground as so many others and see what can be gained by the effort. But we begin the reappraisal of such relatively unimportant issues as the identity of the author by reflecting on the words of John Owen – who wholeheartedly applauded the apostle Paul as the writer – but who also wrote, “Having once lost its true author, no other could be asserted with any such evidence, or indeed probability, but that instantly twenty more, with as good grounds and reason, might be entitled unto it.”¹²⁸

Paul was the earliest to receive credit for this great epistle, acknowledged as the author by the late second century primarily on the testimony of Clement of Alexandria. This assumption would stand for most of the next 1800 years, with notable commentators like John Brown and James Haldane joining John Owen in staunchly adhering to the traditional view. But the arguments used to support Pauline authorship were not even strong enough in the second century to convince Clement’s more famous successor in Alexandria: Origen. Origen

¹²⁸ Owen, John; *The Epistle to the Hebrews; Volume 1*; 68.

concluded after his own study of the grammar, language, theology, and tradition with regard to Hebrews, "What is the very truth in this matter God only knows."¹²⁹

Truly, the arguments in support of Paul as the writer of the Epistle are very weak. Most commentators admit that the terminology used in the letter are as much similar, if not more, to Luke than to Paul. In addition, though the tone of the epistle is undoubtedly the highest, the themes are definitely not Pauline. Or perhaps it is better put that most of the consistently repeated themes found in undisputed Pauline writings are *absent* from Hebrews: i.e., *Justification by Faith*, the *futility of circumcision*, the pre-eternal *election of the saints* in Christ, and so forth. This is not to say that Paul could not write a letter on substantially different topics than those more commonly found in his other letters; it is merely to highlight a glaring difference where tradition sees so much similarity. The internal evidence, as we have had occasion to review already, is against Pauline authorship, but still the tradition prevailed largely unopposed until the late 19th Century. It is remarkable to find an unquestionably Protestant theologian such as John Brown falling back upon the defense of *tradition* in this matter.

There can be little doubt, that when they gave copies of the Epistle to other churches, they did not conceal the name of the writer; and if a tradition be found early received and generally prevailing, unless there be very strong internal evidence of its falsehood, the probability is that that tradition is true. Such a tradition we find prevailing towards the end of the second century, and since that period it has been generally received in the Christian Church. That tradition ascribes the Epistle to the Apostle Paul as its author.¹³⁰

But there are strong internal reasons to doubt this tradition, most significantly Hebrews 2:3-4, as we have seen before, words that it is impossible to believe that the 'called out of season' apostle would ever have written,

¹²⁹ Quoted by Owen; *op cit.*; 67.

¹³⁰ Brown; 7.

*...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was **confirmed to us by those who heard Him**, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?* (Hebrews 2:3-4)

But advocates of Pauline authorship continue to find evidence of that apostle's pen even in the final salutations here at the close of Chapter 13. For instance, the use of the phrase 'God of peace' in the benediction of verses 20 -21 is adduced as further proof of Paul's having written the document, by James Haldane: "For instance, the use of the phrase 'God of peace' in the benediction of verses 20 -21 is adduced as further proof of Paul's having written the document, by James Haldane: "It is an argument for Paul being the author of this Epistle that this title is only to be found in his writings."¹³¹ This is true; the phrase is used by the apostle in four other places among his undisputed epistles: Romans, Philippians, and Thessalonians.

Also enlisted in support of Pauline authorship is the reference to "*our brother Timothy*," in verse 23. It is one of the most basic introductory facts of the Pauline missionary activity that he was accompanied during a great part of his journeys by Timothy, his "*true son according to the faith*" (I Timothy 1:2) and any reference to this apostolic legate brings to mind the apostle himself. But we also know that Timothy was left in places by the apostle, to continue the ministry there (for instance, Ephesus); and that there were others who comprised the entourage of Pauline lieutenants - Silas and Luke, for example. While such a reference to Timothy here at the end of Hebrews certainly fits the style of Paul, it would have been more definitive had Timothy been called 'son,' or 'beloved,' rather than merely 'brother.' This is not to say that 'brother' is an unworthy moniker, by any means; just that it would have been more *uniquely* Pauline to have referred to him as 'son.' Delitzsch writes, "For it cannot be read in the text

¹³¹ Haldane; 395n.

that Timothy appears here as subordinate to the author of the epistle, or as freely subordinating himself.”¹³²

In the end, all such circumstantial references are just that, circumstantial. The style of the letter, the content, the grammar, and several of the passages themselves all point to a conclusion that admits of Pauline influence, but not Pauline authorship. Delitzsch is emphatic: “That St. Paul was not the direct author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we hold to be incontestably certain.”¹³³ Such dogmatism might derive more from Delitzsch nationality than from evidence, but nonetheless it does show that the matter of authorship is still subject to strong opinions so many centuries later.

But perhaps part of the problem is, as mentioned earlier, that certain assumptions are made and then conclusions regarding authorship are deduced therefrom. For instance, the earliest tradition of Pauline authorship derives from Egypt, and not until late in the second century – perhaps 150 after the letter was penned. The great amount of weight that is placed upon Clement of Alexandria’s testimony as to the authorship is based on the assumption that the letter was written to Hebrew Christians *residing in Palestine*, and thus not terribly far from Alexandria. But what if our working hypothesis is correct, and the letter was first addressed to Hebrew believers *in Rome*? If that be the case, then the testimony of the Roman Church would necessarily carry more weight than that of the Alexandrian Church. We turn to another Clement – Clement of Rome – who lived at the very same time that the Epistle was written, and who makes clear references to it in his patristic Letter to the Corinthians. Yet Clement makes no mention of the author nor, indeed, does any other Latin Father until Tertullian (who oddly assigned the authorship to Barnabas).

In fact, when one surveys the general acceptance of the current canon of the New Testament over the course of the first century and over the geographical

¹³² Delitzsch; 405.

¹³³ *Ibid.*; 416.

spread of the Church, one finds that the Book of Hebrews was *first* accepted as canonical in Alexandria, and *last* accepted in Rome. It is easy to understand its acceptance in Alexandria, on the basis of the assumption that Paul wrote it – but if it had been originally sent to Rome, it may have been several years or decades (or perhaps even longer) before it made its way to Alexandria). What is harder to explain is why it did not receive immediate acceptance in Rome, if indeed it was known that Paul was its author. Certainly there is nothing to disqualify it in terms of content; it is one of the most theologically intricate and profound books of the whole Bible. Thus the silence of Clement of Rome and the hesitation of the Western Church to adopt Hebrews into the Canon, are circumstantial points in favor of another author, and are inexplicable on the basis of Pauline authorship.

Thus much hinges on the original destination of the letter. This is the flip side of the question as to the letter's place of writing. Those who hold that Paul was the author almost universally place the location of writing in Rome, and find support again from these closing words in Chapter 13. The author in his postscript writes, "*Those from Italy greet you,*" from which the traditional view asserts that the letter was written 'from Italy.' But this conclusion does not follow and, indeed, is awkward.

If we consider again the hypothesis that the letter was written to Hebrew believers who had returned to their homes in Rome after the lifting of the Claudian Edict by the Emperor Nero, then it would make perfect sense that the author would refer to any Roman or Italian believers who had not yet returned as 'those from Italy.' It would also make sense to include them in the salutation, as they would probably be well known to the recipients of the letter. But if the letter were written in Rome to Hebrew Christians in Palestine, such a reference would be superfluous and strange. It would be superfluous because, writing from Rome, the author was surrounded by Christians *from Italy*; he was in Italy! It would be strange because there never was any special affinity for Italians among the Hebrews of Palestine; it does not make sense that the author would

single out the Italian Christians in a special mention of greeting. So far from proving that the letter was written *from* Rome, this phrase seems almost strong enough to prove the exact opposite: that the letter was written *to* Rome. Delitzsch concludes with uncharacteristic equanimity, “no critical argument as to the locality where the epistle was written ought to be deduced from these words.”¹³⁴

Timothy’s imprisonment is also brought to the bar in defense of a Roman origin, as if no believer could be imprisoned outside of Rome. While it is evident by the mention of Timothy, that the Hebrew believers – wherever they may have lived – were familiar with him, it does little to pinpoint the place of writing or the target audience. It is possible that this mention of Timothy, and the known close relationship between that man and the apostle Paul, was the source of the tradition that assigned authorship to Paul.

From the reference in xii.24 to ‘our brother Timothy’ it is naturally to be inferred that the writer stood in some relationship to the Pauline world-mission circle, and the tradition of Pauline authorship of Hebrews, which came to Alexandria with the Epistle, may have had no other basis than that passage.¹³⁵

Paul spent time, it seems, in just about every prison of every notable city in the Roman world of the 1st Century, although only Philippi is mentioned specifically. His imprisonment in Rome was house arrest due to the fact that he was a Roman citizen awaiting judicial appeal to the Emperor. His example shows, however, what his immediate lieutenants would also have experienced. If we search for a likely place of imprisonment for Timothy, we would probably find it in Ephesus where he was effectively the pastor of the church. Such a surmise would also be supported by the knowledge that Ephesus was a hub of Pauline missionary activity, *and* a place of residence for exiled Hebrew believers

¹³⁴ Delitzsch; 407.

¹³⁵ Manson, William; *The Epistle to the Hebrews*; 169.

from Rome. Luke tells us of Aquila and Priscilla's ministry in the Ephesian Church with regard to Apollos,

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:24-26)

But the couple who mentored Apollos was at Corinth when they first encountered the Pauline mission, and the report of their arrival at that city is significant with regard to the reference to "those from Italy" here in Hebrews 13,

*After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently **come from Italy** with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome)...* (Acts 18:1-2)

After Paul left Antioch on his second missionary journey, it appears that he spent the most time in evangelizing and church planting operating from either the western provinces of Asia Minor or from the Achaian peninsula. This would put the epicenter of the Pauline mission shifting between Corinth and Ephesus. Unfortunately this does not help us in determining the indeterminable: who wrote Hebrews. For between these two cities we encounter Paul, Luke, Silas, and Apollos – all possible candidates for the authorship of the letter. Of this number, Luke has the second most adherents behind Paul, due to certain similarities in Greek construction between the epistle and Luke's historical records in the gospel and the Book of Acts. Some have even asserted that the letter was originally written in Hebrew by the apostle Paul, then translated into Greek – with great liberty taken – by Luke. There is absolutely no warrant, either in the letter itself, or in the extant manuscripts, to support such a theory.

Apollos was a late-comer to the field of possible authors. His candidacy appears to have arisen by instigation of Martin Luther, and has no known support in antiquity. John Owen agrees that such a designation of the book to Apollos answers what we read of the *character* of the man, that he was “*an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures,*” but quickly rejects the theory due to the complete lack of corroboration from the Early Church.

The most troubling piece of data in this whole array of textual criticism, is the silence of Clement of Rome. Clement was familiar with the Epistle and quotes it in his own letter to the Corinthian Church. This strongly supports Rome being the original destination of the letter, as Clement is widely considered to have been one of the leaders of the Roman Church. Clement would have been within the congregation when the epistle first arrived, though the fact that he was a Gentile might be understood as indicating his involvement with another house church in the city. In other words, if the epistle were indeed addressed to professing Christians of Jewish heritage, and if they were pulling back from Christian fellowship in favor of keeping the peace with their ‘brethren according to the flesh,’ then Clement may not have seen the letter immediately. To posit Clement as the ‘bishop’ of Rome, as many historians (and the Roman Catholic Church) do, is anachronistic; at most he would have been an elder of one of the congregations in the Imperial City.

Thus it is entirely possible that Clement did not know the author; and it is also possible that the author was – though incredibly intelligent and eloquent – a relative unknown to the Church at large. In the end we must admit that we have filled the police lineup with only those men with whom we come into contact in the pages of the New Testament. This has been the *modus operandi* of every commentator who has wrestled with the problem, and therein may lay the problem! The silence of Clement is the loudest testimony not only to the fact that we do not know who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, but that as wonderful as this book is, it may have come from someone outside the orbit of our knowledge.

Two modern commentators accept the possibility – perhaps even the probability – of this conclusion. Although Delitzsch is beyond emphatic in his denial of Pauline authorship, he makes no dogmatic claim to have solved the puzzle.

We esteem it possible that Luke was the independent author of it; but that any other than Luke was the indirect, or even the independent author, appears to us to be a possibility which cannot indeed be absolutely denied.¹³⁶

And it seems fitting to end this study by torpedoing the pet theory of its author:

The silence of Clement on this subject, despite the fact that he knew and used the Epistle, is only to be explained if we assume that either the authorship was quite unknown to him, or was linked to some name not familiar to the contemporary Church. *This excludes the ascription of the work to Apollos.*¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Delitzsch; 416-417.

¹³⁷ Manson; 171 (italics added).