

An Easter Benediction

Hebrews 13:20-21

There is a great danger in preaching on a passage of Scripture that is commonly used in worship services as a benediction. It is an obvious danger, namely that we might thoroughly analyze the passage and even come to understand it correctly, but then miss the whole point. You see, the main point of a benediction is not to teach you what to believe or even how to live, but rather to give to you, to proclaim to you, the great blessing of God. A benediction. So if you don't go home sensing that blessing, if you don't leave realizing that you have received a blessing from God, then the preacher has failed to rightly preach the text itself.

So that's the danger I face this morning, because I have chosen this Easter Sunday to preach not from one of the gospel accounts of that resurrection morning, but from the end of Hebrews 13. It would be easy, and comfortable, to preach from one of the four historical accounts of Jesus' resurrection. I could as well preach from Paul's theological discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. But this morning, this year, let's look at Hebrews.

And I do want to begin with doctrine, because that is the foundation of the blessing. The doctrine is simple and straightforward. Actually, the doctrine is an historical fact. Namely,

I. THE FACT OF THE RESURRECTION.

v.20 "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead..."

Before we focus on the benediction itself, I must proclaim to

you what this text presumes to be true. That Jesus Christ, on the third day, rose from the dead. That fact is clearly an integral part of the Christian religion, and we recite those words regularly with the words of the Apostles' Creed, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead."

Just one historical description,

Mat. 28:5 "But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."

I don't have to convince you how important this doctrine is, for it is the centerpiece of the gospel itself. Let me emphasize Paul's words in,

1 Cor. 15:1 "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. 14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up--if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope

in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. 20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

And so he has. I proclaim to you as fact, true historical reality.

A. God has raised up Jesus from the dead.

By the supernatural power of God Almighty, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and is alive. And notice how the risen Jesus is identified in our text, “the great shepherd of the sheep.”

In other words, he was raised from the dead for a purpose, to fulfill a purpose. The fulfill the task of being a shepherd. And we all know how important that is.

Ps. 23:1 “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

B. Jesus is the good shepherd.

So it is, that the one who was raised from the dead is the one who laid down his life for the sheep.

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep...14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep...27 “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 “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. 30 “I and My Father are one.”

So those are the facts, the doctrine of the resurrection. But then, moving closer to the blessing.

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE RESURRECTION.

Why did God raise Jesus from the dead? The answer to that question is at the heart of the blessing pronounced by these words of benediction. There are, of course, many ways to answer that question, but let me begin by noting how God the Father is identified. If Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep, then what about the Father? He is called, “the God of peace.”

And why the God of peace? Because he establishes peace between himself and mankind. Reconciliation.

Rom. 5:10 “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Peace. That’s the gospel itself, peace with God. That’s the message of the gospel. That’s the work of the gospel.

Rom. 10:13 “For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” 14 How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!”

Thus the blessing is the blessing of peace.

A. The re-establishment of peace with God.

Note the more familiar benediction I so often read from,

Num. 6:24 “The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD

make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace.”

Beloved, there is no greater blessing than this; that you, a rebellious sinner subject to the wrath of God might be re-established in a relationship of peace with God. Thus it is the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep. And then we read, “through the blood of the everlasting covenant.” Through the blood of the covenant.

What was the blood of the covenant? The curse. The curse of the covenant. Death.

Lev. 17:11 “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”

And how is that interpreted in the New Testament?

Heb. 9:11 “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. 16 For where there is a [covenant], there must also of necessity be the death of the [covenant maker]. 17 For a [covenant] is in force after men are dead, since it has no

power at all while the [covenant maker] lives. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. 19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." 21 Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. 22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.”

The blood was the curse of the covenant demanded by God as the prescribed penalty for covenant breakers. It was the blood of the animals literally cut into two pieces as the covenant was established, signifying the willingness to accept the punishment of death if the covenant would be violated. The blood of the covenant was the curse of death.

And Jesus was raised from the dead in the final triumph and completion of that necessary work of pouring out his own blood for our redemption. Jesus was raised from the dead “through the blood of the everlasting covenant.” He was raised from the dead after the conclusion of his work,

B. The completion of the work of redemption.

Heb. 10:14 “For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”

Remember the blood of the Old Covenant? It was sprinkled on the doorways, protecting the people of Israel from the curse of God as he brought death to the firstborn of every family in Egypt. That tenth and final plague was the means of deliverance to God’s people Israel.

Ex. 24:6 “And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins,

and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." 8 And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

Surely, you remember Jesus' own words as he took the third cup of the passover meal during that last supper before his crucifixion,

Mat. 26:27 "Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

The completion of the work of redemption, pouring out the blood of the new covenant. It was Jesus' own blood. And so the blessing, the benediction for us, is that because God has raised Jesus from the dead, the blessings of the covenant become ours.

v.20 "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant..."

But still, that sentence is incomplete. Now...what? What, actually, is the blessing that comes to those who have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ? What, actually, is the blessing that comes to those whose sins are forgiven" As if that isn't blessing enough!

I could ask that question this way, What is...

III. THE IMPACT OF THE RESURRECTION UPON THE LIVES OF CHRISTIANS.

And now we read,

v.21

May the God of peace make you complete! May the God who has made peace with you, through the blood of his beloved son, equip you! That's amazing. Here is the gospel emphasis upon good works, as the blessing of God to those whom he has redeemed. The blessing is nothing less than,

A. An equipping from God for every good work.

Or maybe more literally, "May God perfect you in all goodness." You see, he actually makes you good! He transform you. He restores you. He re-creates you. So it is that in Christ, the believer is fully and finally redeemed, granted the blessing of the forgiveness of sins, by grace alone through faith alone.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

And then the blessing comes, by which you are equipped for good works!

Eph. 2:10 "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

And so, beloved, the ultimate blessing of this Easter message is not simply that Jesus died for your sins and was raised from the dead, but that Jesus died for your sins and was raised from the dead in order to make you alive! To give you newness of life by equipping you for every good work!

Isn't that what Romans 6 is all about?

Rom. 6:4 "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in

newness of life. 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin. 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. 11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Praise be to God. Death no longer has dominion over the believer. We are alive with Christ. Sin no longer has dominion over the believer. That is what it means, “We are freed from sin.” “We are no longer slaves to sin.” We are alive with Christ.

What a blessing. An equipping of God. But notice, too, not just the equipping. Not just what God does for us. But the blessing of what God does in us. He works in us, thereby enabling us to do good works! Or, in the language here of our text,

B. A working of God in us that we might be pleasing to him.

v.21 “...working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.”

God works in us, so that what we do would actually be pleasing to him! Amazing, isn't it, that our sacrifices could be well-pleasing to God. But they are. Through Jesus Christ, but the working of God in us, by the equipping he gives to us, the sacrifice of our lives becomes bears a sweet smelling aroma in

his sight. It is pleasing to him.

This interaction of God's equipping us and his actually working in us is so clearly expressed in,

Phil 2:12 “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; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

Work out your salvation. For it is God who works in you.

People of God, that is the blessing. The benediction. That God would so work in you who trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation, that what you do for him would “well pleasing in his sight.”

Let me emphasize, this blessing is only for those who believe. This blessing is only to those who recognize and confess their own sinfulness, only to those who by faith in Jesus Christ and repentance of sin, would have eternal life. It is only for those who believe that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, having obtained eternal redemption.

So what must you do to be saved? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rom. 10:13 “For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

And to you who have that so great a salvation, let this blessing be yours. Receive it. Hear these words as the words of God spoken to you. Take upon yourself the glorious blessing of the resurrection which God proclaims to you, by the word of the inspired prophet,

v.20 “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”