

## An Easter Benediction

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### Hebrews 13:20-21

The letter to the Hebrews was written to a church made up largely of Jewish Christians. Though we do not know the author, he was either an apostle or writing on behalf of the apostles. In chapter 13, he calls his letter an “exhortation” (vs. 22). An exhortation is an earnest way of communicating, such that the hearer will sense the burden of the one addressing them. An exhortation can be negative in the form of a correction or rebuke. Exhortations can also be encouragements to continue in what is good.

Christians were becoming increasingly persecuted in the later half of the first century. Additional pressure was placed upon Jewish Christians that they would reject Christ and return to Judaism. Rome had, for the most part, tolerated Jews and their religious customs. Christians, on the other hand, were seen increasingly as insurrectionists, intolerant, heretics. They humiliated Greco-Roman morality by remaining chaste in marriage, practicing generosity, rescuing their discarded babies, etc.

The writer of Hebrews (almost certainly a Jewish Christian) is highly motivated to remind his Jewish Christian readers of the supremacy of Christ, his fulfillment of the Old Covenant ceremonies, his atoning death, and their inclusion into the covenant community in its new fullness, the church of Jesus Christ.

- “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- In chapter 11 the writer offers a catalogue of great Old Testament saints who were justified by faith in the coming Messiah even though they suffered much.
- “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

### The Benediction

*[20] Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, [21] equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)*

- A benediction is a good or blessed word. It is a prayer for God to bless the recipients in particular ways. Paul concluded most of his epistles with a benediction to his readers. There are benedictions in the Old Testament as well, perhaps most famously that which Moses instructed Aaron and the other priests to speak to the people (Numbers 6:22-27). God’s inclusion of benedictions in the life of his people is closely tied to his covenant promise to be their God, the Shepherd who will never leave them (Ezekiel 34:15, 23-25; 37:24, 26).
- One of the features that makes the benediction in Hebrews of such great value is that it fits the resurrection of Jesus into the daily fabric of the Christian life. Jesus’ resurrection is both a once-for-all act accomplishing our eternal salvation *and* the daily working of his “power toward us who believe” (Ephesians 1:19-20). The God who raised Jesus from the dead has made peace with us through the blood of his crucified Son. And on this basis, he now equips us through the risen Christ with every good thing, that we might do his will. God’s work in the sacrifice and resurrection of his eternal Son makes possible all our good works for his glory.

“Now may the God of peace”

- He is asking the God of peace to give his people a particular blessing. He does not bless them on the basis of his own power or authority. Rather he invokes God’s blessing upon them. Moses and Aaron were instructed to say to the people: “The Lord bless you...and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). The author of Hebrews is following that example.
- He specifies that this is the God who has made peace with them. This is not peace in general, but the specific peace that God makes with sinners who repent. God is the God of peace because he is the author of the peace established by Christ on the cross and experienced by all those who trust in him.

- The peace which God had made with sinners through Christ is central to every other experience of peace in the Christian life. This is the peace of the gospel (Ephesians 6:15). It is the peace which has been won by the blood of Christ (Colossians 1:20). “It is the God of this peace, which speaks forgiveness and acceptance to man at the very heart of his being and which should permeate the whole of his existence in all its relationships and vicissitudes...”<sup>1</sup>

“who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,”

- Of all the things that the God of Peace has done to grant us peace, none are so great as his act of bringing back from the dead our Lord Jesus. “The proof of the acceptance of this sacrifice on our behalf is his resurrection from the grave and his exaltation to the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3; 12:2), whereby he is declared to be Lord of all (Philippians 2:8–10)....The resurrection manifested his glory as the prince of life and conqueror of death.”<sup>2</sup> If Christ has not been raised, then our faith is futile and we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17).

“the great shepherd of the sheep,”

- There are so many ways in which Scripture reveals and depicts Christ, but here the writer digs into Israel's own history and points to the Lord as the great shepherd of his people. Through the prophet Ezekiel God declares, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...” (Ezekiel 34:15). We think of the great Psalm 23 in which we are told that the Lord is our Shepherd. Among Jesus' great “I Am” statements, he tells us “I am the good shepherd.” Our good and great Shepherd knows what we need and leads us to the place of life and rest. He feeds and protects us. Our great Shepherd tells us that he lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

“by the blood of the eternal covenant,”

- Jesus was raised on the basis of a covenant between the Father and the Son before the foundation of the world: “...he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:5-6). This eternal covenant of redemption is further illuminated by Jesus who said: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:37-40).

“equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight,”

- This benediction moves in the direction of our sanctification. God blesses us that we might be just exactly what humanity was originally created to be. But doing God's will and doing all things that are “pleasing in his sight,” seems like something far beyond our grasp. Scripture tells us that we are sinners by nature and by choice (Romans 3:9-18; Ephesians 2:1-3). Every day we feel the war going on between our desire to sin and our desire to please the Lord. But this is precisely the point at which the resurrection of Jesus communicates good news to us for not only has God won for us eternal life but he has made known to us “his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Ephesians 1:20).

“through Jesus Christ,”

- The great source of strength for all Christians is their union with Christ. Repeatedly in the New Testament we see Christians described as those who are “in Christ.” In Christ, we are not only forgiven but we are empowered to live for his good pleasure: “For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works...” (Ephesians 2:10).

“to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

- The Lord Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21). Jesus is the risen Lord whose glory who is our earthly pursuit and eternal joy (WSC 1:1).

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid