

“The Great Shepherd of the Sheep”

The Twenty-Fifth and Final in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 13:17-25; Isaiah 63:7-14

By the time we come to the last chapter of the Book of Hebrews, we still know very little about the author of this epistle, and we know virtually nothing about the church receiving this remarkable letter. We don't even know in what city the church receiving this letter is located—Rome or Alexandria. In the final chapter, the author implies that he personally knows those who were leading this church, and that he's familiar enough with the congregation to tell them that he desires to return to see them again. Although we don't know much about the details of authorship and location, we do know the primary problem facing this church. Many of its members had returned (or were considering returning) to Judaism from which they had recently converted to Christianity. In response, the author skillfully proves to us that Old Testament types and shadows pointed ahead to Jesus Christ who is Israel's Messiah, an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek, and the mediator of the new covenant (with its greater promises). Jesus has none of the human weaknesses of Moses and he secures much better covenant promises. The author has made a compelling case for the superiority of Jesus Christ, as well as warning this congregation of the danger of neglecting such a great salvation and/or falling away from the savior. And he now brings this letter to a close.

And so we wrap up our series on the Book of Hebrews. When we took up the final chapter of this epistle (chapter thirteen), I mentioned that we could either cover the entire chapter in one sermon by rushing through it (which I did not really want to do), or we could cover it in two sermons, even though there was not a good place to break up the chapter. So I took up the first sixteen verses last time (part one), while we conclude the chapter (part two) by covering verses 17-25. But with this section of Hebrews completed, we will have finished our study of this epistle—a most powerful and remarkable epistle indeed.

As we saw in the opening 16 verses of chapter thirteen of the Book of Hebrews, the author shifts from setting out his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ (mostly indicatives—which are a statement of fact, things we are to believe) to issuing a number of imperatives (commands which we are to obey). These imperatives reflect the fact that those who have been made perfect by the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ should strive to live their lives in a manner consistent with that salvation secured for us by our covenant mediator.

In the opening verses of this concluding chapter, the author exhorts the congregation to “*let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers . . .*” to “*remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*” To “*let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*” And to “*keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have.*” All of these things are found throughout the New Testament's ethical teaching and should characterize those who have believed the gospel and been united to Jesus Christ through faith.

The author reminds this congregation that Jesus is with them during all of their trials, and since Jesus bore the shame and reproach of Israel when he died on the cross for our sins outside the city of Jerusalem as the final sacrifice for sin, “*through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.*” This is as clear a declaration as we find in all of

Scripture that the Christian life is to be lived as a life of gratitude before God.

Since Jesus offered the once for all and final sacrifice for our sins, our obedience to God's commands and our worship of God now become our acceptable sacrifice to God, because of what Jesus Christ has already done for us. Our good works as well as our worship should flow out of grateful hearts, made so by the joyful consideration of all that Jesus has done for us when he died for our sins and rendered us perfect before our heavenly father. Good works and praise of God, then, is our acceptable sacrifice under the new and better covenant.

So, as we wrap up our study of Hebrews, we pick up where we left off last time with verse 17. In verse 16, the author exhorted his readers: "*do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*" Continuing in this same vein we read the following exhortation in verse 17. "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*" As I mentioned when we took up the first half of this chapter, three times in this section of Hebrews the author mentions those who were leaders in this church. In verse 7, he said of them, "*remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*" Now he speaks of the need to obey these leaders.

One reason they were to obey their leaders centers in the fact that these leaders preached the gospel to this congregation, apparently, in the face of great pressure not to do so. Since most of the members of this church were converts to Christianity from Judaism, there would have been much anger by the families and synagogues directed toward those family members and friends who left Judaism to become Christians, and it is likely that the earlier reference to remember those who had been imprisoned is tied to the fact that members of this church (perhaps even some of its leaders) had been arrested and imprisoned because of their new allegiance to Jesus Christ. The verb the author uses when he speaks of how these men have kept watch is a verb which refers to the loss of sleep.¹ These elders of this church have not been sleeping, but were actually losing sleep because like faithful soldiers standing guard, they were exercising diligent watchfulness over those whom they have been called to serve.

We do not (and should not) submit to church leaders without consideration of the example they set for us. However, we are to submit to those who have a track record of faithfulness to the word of God—especially in the face of great pressure not to preach the gospel. These men have been the ones to care for the souls of those God has brought to faith in Jesus Christ and who were members of this struggling congregation. The author reminds this church and those who lead it that their leaders will give an account to the Lord of the church regarding their conduct and faithfulness—as will all others who are called to lead in the church. No doubt, this is why the Apostle James warned those in the Jerusalem church "*not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*" (James 3:1). So, despite the difficulties facing this congregation, and because of their leader's faithfulness, they are exhorted to support their leaders by heeding their counsel with joy and without complaining. Complaining does not help anyone—not even the complainer.

It is also likely—given the way the author asks for the congregation to pray for him—that he is familiar with the men leading this congregation (as the congregation is likely familiar with the author) and that he knows full-well (even perhaps from experience) what they have endured. As he requests in verse 18,

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 385.

“pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.” As those who lead the congregation have demonstrated their faithfulness to Christ for all to see, the author sending this epistle hopes to have a clear conscience because he has discharged his own duties, just as well as have those who led this congregation have done.

In verse 19 we find one of the few personal comments in all the letter in which the author reveals his own desire to see the members of this congregation in person. He writes, *“I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.”* This probably indicates that the author had been present in this congregation at some point, and he sincerely desires to come back to them. Many speculate that the author had at one time even been a pastor to them, but there is no evidence to support this. But from what he says, it seems likely that the congregation is familiar with the author, and that he desires to see those to whom he is writing in person yet again. The important point here is that the author really does understand the difficulties this congregation is facing.

In verses 20-21, as the author begins to bring his letter to a close, he offers a doxology, as well as a prayer on behalf of this congregation. He leaves them with these impressive and beautiful words, *“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, 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.”*

There are a number of important theological elements in these two verses and we ought to consider them carefully. The author of Hebrews invokes the God of peace, and reminds this congregation that God has the power to raise the dead. God even ratified the eternal covenant (the covenant of grace) through the blood of Jesus Christ. God did so to equip those reading/hearing this doxology with every good thing. The author also prays that God will work in the lives of the members of this congregation according to his will, specifically through the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. The author ends by ascribing all praise and glory to God. No wonder that this particular doxology has been used in Christian worship from the earliest days of the church.

When we look at this doxology in more detail a number of things emerge. For one thing, that the author speaks of the Father as a God of peace is probably an indication of the severity of the troubles this congregation was then enduring. Since some in the church were returning to Judaism, there may have been some heated debate and division within the church. Our God, the author reminds us, is the God of peace. This is an important reminder of where struggling Christians should turn in the midst of turmoil. Not only is our God a God of peace, but his power is revealed by the fact that he raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead.

This is the only place in this epistle where Jesus' resurrection is explicitly mentioned by the author, although Jesus' ascension has been mentioned earlier in connection with Jesus' priesthood and exaltation to God's right hand. Jesus' resurrection is important in this context because Jesus' sacrifice for our sins means nothing unless Jesus is raised from the dead—and this is the supreme example of God's power. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, then this is the author's proof that God will never abandon those in this congregation who have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection—something already promised them back in verses 5-6: *“I will never leave you nor forsake you’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”* Since God raised Jesus from the dead, and since Christians have already been buried and raised with Jesus, then Christians should be confident that God will keep his promises to his people when he calls them to suffer.

This is also the only place in Hebrews where the author speaks of Jesus as the great shepherd of the sheep. The title “shepherd” appears in Isaiah 63:11 (part of our Old Testament lesson), where it was applied to Moses as he led Israel through the sea during the Exodus. As Moses—the shepherd of God’s people—led the people of Israel through the Red Sea, so then Jesus is the great shepherd because he has conquered something much greater than the sea, namely death and the grave. In using the title shepherd in this way, especially when Isaiah had used it of Moses, the author of Hebrews is, in effect, summarizing all of the other titles assigned to Jesus throughout this epistle.² Jesus is the great shepherd of God’s people. He is everything Moses was, but he is so much more. He is that shepherd long promised to Israel precisely as recounted in John 10.

In fact, Jesus is such a great shepherd that he has redeemed the people of God by the blood of the eternal covenant—his own blood shed for us upon the cross. Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins is not only the means by which God’s people are now made perfect, but his death fulfills God’s gracious covenant promise. By speaking of the blood of the eternal covenant, the author is, in effect, summarizing the entire purpose of Hebrews chapter 11, the so-called “hall of faith” in which he gave us a list of many of the key Old Testament saints who believed this same covenant promise by looking ahead, but which we now see fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The great shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep, and in doing so, shed that blood which is the foundation of the eternal covenant of grace.

In the final verses (vv. 22-25), the author leaves us with several personal remarks. *“I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you.”* The word of exhortation which the author appeals for his readers/listeners to bear, is the content of this letter so far. When the author speaks of Timothy being imprisoned, he is almost certainly referring to Paul’s young pastor friend, to whom two New Testament epistles are addressed. There is no mention of Timothy being arrested elsewhere in the New Testament, so it is difficult to establish the time and circumstances of this event. But we can say the people in this church knew Timothy and given what the author says here, Timothy was, at times, a traveling companion of the author.

The author concludes by sending his greetings. The phrase *“those who come from Italy”* is rather vague, and can be paraphrased as “greetings to you from our Italian friends.” Because of this ambiguity, we don’t know if this refers to Italians outside Italy sending their greetings to a church in Rome (the mostly likely possibility), or if the reference is that of a group of Italians with the author in Italy, who are extending their greetings to a church outside of Italy (i.e., in Alexandria).³ The author then extends a word of grace to all reading/hearing this letter, presumably many of whom he knew personally.

What, then, do we say as we wrap up our time in this letter?

Throughout the Book of Hebrews, the author has had one overriding purpose, and that is to make as powerful a case as possible for the superiority of Jesus Christ. The author’s answer to those who had professed faith in Jesus Christ, were baptized, and had become members of the church receiving this letter, only to return to Judaism after coming under persecution because of their new-found faith in

² Bruce, Hebrews, 388.

³ Bruce, Hebrews, 391.

Christ, was to prove to them from the pages of the LXX that all of God's covenant promises are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Since Jesus was revealed in the types and shadows of the Old Testament (more specifically in the old covenant which God revealed to Israel at Mount Sinai), to return to the types and shadows was to reject the Old Testament's promise of a coming Messiah. The irony here should not be missed. The author's conclusion is that for someone to renounce Christ in the face of the overwhelming Old Testament evidence which he has just produced, and return to Judaism (thereby committing the sin of apostasy), is to renounce the God of the Old Testament.

To make his case, the author has presented a number arguments which would be helpful for us to briefly summarize as we wrap up. The first thing we need to see that the author has done is to establish the identity of Jesus from the pages of the Old Testament. As we saw in the opening verses of the first chapter, Jesus is that one through whom God has spoken, and that one through whom God has created the world. In fact, the author says of Jesus, "*he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power*" (Hebrews 1:1-3). This is why Jesus is superior to the angels (about whom many Jews of this time were fascinated) and why the angelic beings worship and serve Jesus, their creator. Jesus is God, and the exact radiance of his glory.

The second point is that Jesus is also God in human flesh—having taken to himself a true human nature in the incarnation. As we read in Hebrews 2:14-17, "*since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.*" Although fully God, Jesus took to himself a true human nature for a very specific purpose—to save us from our sins by offering a sacrifice for sin sufficient to turn aside the wrath of God and render "perfect" all those for whom he dies. As the God-man, Jesus is himself the final and all sufficient sacrifice for sin.

Third, because Jesus is truly God and man, the author can say of him in chapter 9:11-14, "*but when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*" Jesus is our great and final high priest. Jesus offered a sacrifice which forever turns aside the wrath God from us—something the blood of bulls could never do. And because he died such a death, he has secured for us both an eternal redemption as well as a clear conscience before God. Can we even put a value on the knowledge that when our head hits the pillow at night, we can be at peace, knowing that God is not going to punish us for our sins, because he punished Jesus Christ for us, and in our place? Jesus is a high priest who knows what it is to be human (he knows our true condition and weakness), and yet who never sleeps nor tires of us when we struggle while running the race.

Fourth, as the author writes in chapter 10:12-18, "*but when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write*

them on their minds,' then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin." Jesus offered that one and final sacrifice which put an end to the entire Old Testament sacrificial system. Because Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial system, this means that these sacrifices were types and shadows, pointing ahead to Christ's death for our sins. This is why Christian ministers are not priests, and this is why we don't kill an animal and offer its remains and sacrificial blood to God. The final sacrifice has been made. The only acceptable sacrifice we offer is our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Finally, throughout this epistle the author has shown from the pages of the Old Testament how Jesus is superior to Moses and the Sinai covenant and that the earthly tabernacle and temple should have pointed the people of God to Jesus the great high priest in God's heavenly (and eternal temple). Through his death, Jesus has ushered in the long-expected new covenant, which is the fulfillment of everything which God promised to Abraham. In Hebrews 8, the author writes, "*Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. . . . In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.*" With the coming of Jesus Christ, the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai is now null and void. Jesus has established a new and better covenant which much greater and much better promises.

The blessings of this new covenant are spelled out in chapter 10:19-25. "*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean 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 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.*" What has Jesus secured for us? Confidence to enter into God's presence. Our sinful hearts are now clean before God. We need not fear death. We can confess our faith before men, knowing we will be vindicated by God. We can do good works, encourage one another, and meet together until Christ comes back, without fear of God rejecting us, or without fear that we did not do enough. No, we did not do enough, but Jesus did. He is our great high priest, whose death renders us perfect, and whose present priestly work establishes our relationship with God.

And so having come to the end of our twenty-five week study of this book, I can think of no more appropriate words on which to end than those given us by the author himself. "*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, 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.*"