

November 10, 2019

A BENEDICTION AND AN EXHORTATION

Hebrews 13:20-25

(30 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

When you read the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, it feels like there is only one rational person in the narrative, doesn't it? Everyone is scared to go up against Goliath. And in one sense, rightly so. Goliath is described in enormous, intimidating terms. He's tall, strong, and courageous. But on the other hand, by challenging the people of God, he was challenging the God of Israel, to whom Goliath is obviously no threat. And it seems that David is the only one who gets that. In his first comments, he asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Sam 17:26). Then when he addresses Goliath, he makes the issue clear, saying, "I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts. . . . This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand. . . . For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam 17:45-47). Viewed apart from the recognition that "the battle is the LORD's," yes, this is a terrifying scene. When understood rightly, however, the question is simply, "Who is willing to obey God and watch him glorify himself before these Philistines?" The narrative is simply demanding one person to come along with the right perspective on the situation.

In many ways, that's what this letter to the Hebrews is about. Consider the situation. They're most likely facing persecution, and it's making them want to abandon their commitment to Jesus. But the author of Hebrews has shown them that this is utterly irrational. First, he has given them warning after warning, helping them to see that walking away from Jesus is walking toward the furious, merciless, and fearful judgment of God. Why would you allow temporary persecution to push you toward eternal wrath? Moreover, if they're thinking they can gain something by running back to old covenant worship, consider what their move means. They're leaving an infinitely glorious high priest, an eternal covenant, and the effective sacrifice of Christ for our sins in exchange for an obsolete covenant, inferior priests who cannot save, and meaningless sacrifices that cannot atone for sins. Like those Israelites who were so overwhelmed at Goliath in front of them that they forgot the might of their infinitely glorious God, so these Jewish believers are thinking in utterly irrational ways. And so, just as David burst onto the scene in 1 Samuel 17 to bring some reason to the moment, so the author of Hebrews has written this letter to open their eyes again to how irrational their thinking is and point them back to Christ, who is better than anything you want to set alongside of him. And we've seen this over thirteen chapters, as we've taken twenty-nine weeks to walk through the glorious arguments of this letter that remind us that Christ is better than the angels, Moses, Joshua, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and that he mediates a better covenant.

The readers, therefore, should have been eager to repent of any inkling of wanting to abandon Jesus and strengthened to press on in faith and faithful obedience to him, despite what persecution might come. But just in case they were still a bit shaky about walking forward in enduring faith in their obedience to Jesus during these hard times, the author of Hebrews provides one final prayer in which he summarizes many of the glorious truths that he has

covered over this letter he has written. It should have served as one final reminder of all that he has said so that they might respond in obedience to his exhortations.

And the glorious thing is that these final verses can serve the same purpose for us as well. I know it's hard to hold twenty-nine weeks of teaching in our heads, and so this morning will serve as a reminder of some glorious truths that this book has taught us before giving us one last exhortation. Let's begin then with this reminder of glorious truths that we see in our text this morning. We'll begin with the reminder that we have peace with God.

We have peace with God

As the author begins this glorious benediction, the first thing he does is identify God as the God of peace, writing, "Now may the God of peace . . ."). And perhaps we brush past this quickly, thinking, "Yes, *of course* he's the God of peace." After all, we also hear this language elsewhere. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 God is also referred to as the "God of peace." But the reason the author can refer to God as the God of peace to his hearers is because he's speaking to them as believers. Just a few chapters back he'd written, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31) and described the Spirit as being "outraged" (10:29) as one spurns the Son of God. We could also note that Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that all of us were once children of wrath before God before he made us alive in Christ. So, yes, toward us God is a God of peace, but that is no small matter. We are only reconciled to him because our Lord bore the wrath of God that we'd merited through our sins.

So think about this glorious truth. Right now, if your faith is in Christ, despite all your rebellion, God's disposition toward you is one of peace. He wants you to know that you are reconciled. He wants you to rest in the peace that he has for you. If we know Christ, we can live our lives knowing, in the words of Romans 5, that "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and that God's love for us "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:1, 5). What a blessed reality this is for us.

But that's not all. The nature of this final word of blessing in Hebrews is to pile up blessing upon blessing upon blessing. And next we're reminded that Christ is our risen shepherd.

Christ is our risen shepherd

The author continues, "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep . . ." The image of God as our shepherd is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. Of course Psalm 23 famously pictures God as our shepherd who protects us, leads us, nourishes us, walks with us in times of suffering, and showers us with goodness and mercy. But that's not the only place. In Ezekiel 34 the Lord pictures himself as a shepherd coming to gather his sheep. Just listen to the care and affection the Lord displays in this text as the prophet writes, "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. . . . I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain

heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak” (Ezek 34:11-16). Then, as Jesus identifies himself in John 10:11 as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Now, before we reflect on this for a second, let me make a pastoral application. Oftentimes people have said things like, “My earthly Father was abusive [or the like], so it’s hard for me to come to grips with the picture of God as my heavenly Father,” and I by no means want to downplay the negative consequences abusive earthly fathers can have. It’s a tragedy to know that fathers abuse their children, and it makes us cry out for the return of Christ, doesn’t it? But I think this is all the more why we have to take our cues from what the Bible actually says about who our God is to us. And here’s why I say this—you and I have never been sheep. We’ve always been humans. But I don’t think we’re tempted to say, “I can’t get this picture because I’ve never gotten to experience life as a sheep with a good shepherd.”

And so the glorious thing is that we can all come to this imagery with a blank slate. Not one of us has a more pleasant experience being a sheep than our neighbor. All of us have no experience with this at all. No preconceived notions of how a shepherd must treat us. So we can all just take our cues from what the Bible says. And what it pictures for us is that our Lord Jesus Christ is a shepherd who has died for us and been raised for us because he loves us and walks with us through life, caring for us, nourishing us, protecting us, and defending us. He wants us to be able to rest in his presence and know that we are cared for and loved by him.

Therefore, the author reminds us that we are at peace with God and that our Lord Jesus Christ is our great shepherd who laid down his life for us, rose from the dead, and now oversees and cares for us as we walk through this life, being with us even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And yet there’s more. We’re also reminded that every new covenant promise is sure and certain.

Every new covenant promise is sure and certain

In an exceptionally brief way the author throws into this benediction the phrase, “by the blood of the eternal covenant,” but he does not intend for this brief phrase to be ignored. This has actually been a dominant theme in our study of Hebrews. These Jewish believers were feeling the temptation to try to go back and live under the old covenant, with its regulations. But the author has reminded them of what the old covenant meant. It meant restricted access to God. Your way of approaching God under the old covenant was through a representative—the priest—and he could only go into the presence of God once a year. It meant that your sins had to continually be atoned for. The priest would offer a sacrifice for sins on the day of atonement, and then he had to do it the next year and the next and the next and the next. And this need for repeated offerings was always a reminder that these sacrifices weren’t able to fully and finally deal with your sin. It meant your conscience could never be cleared. Remember how in 9:8 the author reminded us, “According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot

perfect the conscience of the worshipper”? Restricted access, sins always needing to be dealt with, and a conscience that couldn’t be cleansed. That’s what returning to the old covenant would mean.

But during the days of the old covenant God made a promise that he’d establish a new covenant. The author of Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah 31 in 8:10-12, writing, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brothers, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

And remember how the author reminded us that “not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood” (9:18). He said that to show us that as the old covenant had been enacted through the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats, this new covenant would be enacted through the shed blood of Christ. Therefore, when Jesus shed his blood on the cross, he was bringing about every new covenant promise that we just read. His blood made those promises sure and certain. And not only that, but this new covenant would never need to be replaced, like the old one had needed to be, for this covenant would last forever. This is why the author uses the phrase “by the blood of the *eternal* covenant.”

This means, then, that because of the shed blood of Christ, these covenant promises are now sure and certain. God is our God, and we are his people. We all know God as our Father and can enter his presence through Christ any time, knowing that he delights in us. We have forgiveness of sins, knowing that God has put them away, not to charge them against us ever again. This is what is true of us in Christ.

But there’s another promise that’s included that is a bit tricky. Remember the promise: “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts”? What does that mean? After all, doesn’t Paul say in Romans 2 that everyone has the law written on their hearts? Indeed he does. In Romans 2:12-16 Paul argues that unbelieving Gentiles “show that the work of the law is written on their hearts” (2:15) on that day of judgment when their hearts accuse them of wrongdoing or attempt to excuse them from it. So if all people—even unbelievers—have the law written on their hearts in the sense of knowing right and wrong, what is this particular new covenant promise that is true only for believers that God will write his laws on our hearts?

I think that when he says he’s going to write his laws on our hearts he means not only at the level of us having a conscience but he means at the level of desire. That is, he’s telling us that one of the new covenant promises is that God will cause the hearts of believers to desire to obey his Word. And this is confirmed if we look at the way the prophet Ezekiel speaks of this new covenant promise. God says in Ezekiel 36:26, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to

obey my rules.” God’s promise is to give us new hearts that desire to obey him and his Spirit that actually moves our hearts to act on that.

Can that be true? I mean, if that were true we could actually say that God has equipped all of us through new hearts and his Spirit dwelling within us to obey him and is actually moving within us to do those things. Indeed it does, and look at the next element of the benediction and our next point.

The Spirit has equipped us and will empower us to live godly lives

The benediction continues, “Now may the God of peace . . . 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.” Part of the reason for the new covenant, the Lord said through Ezekiel was so that his name would no longer be profaned. Israel had profaned the name of God. They were identified as his people, but they did not honor him with their obedience. Instead, they dove into idolatry repeatedly. That’s why God promised a new covenant where he’d make sure this would no longer happen. Under this new covenant, he’d give his people new, transformed hearts that longed to obey him and put his Spirit within them so that he would cause them to walk in his ways.

Brothers and sisters, if your faith is in Christ, this is true of you. Remember the famous story of Martin Luther where a young man was struggling to believe God had really saved him, and Luther instructed him to go and sin like crazy that night? The young man responded, “I can’t do that.” And Luther answered, “Now ask yourself why.”

What Luther wanted him to see is that the new covenant promises of a new heart and God’s indwelling Spirit were evident in that young man’s life. When the young man said he couldn’t do that, he didn’t mean he physically couldn’t sin like crazy. Of course he could have. He meant he couldn’t because his heart wouldn’t let him. His heart desired to obey God, not disobey him. The Spirit within him was moving him to obey God, not disobey him.

This gift is ours. The Lord equips us for everything good to do his will. His Spirit works in us so that we desire obedience and are moved to do it. If you know Christ, you can testify to this, can’t you? So, think about this. You have peace with God. Christ is your risen shepherd who has laid down his life for you. His shed blood means that God is your God, and you belong to him. It means you have forgiveness of sins, forever. And it means that you’ve been given a heart with good desires and the Spirit of God, who is working in you to move your heart to want to turn from sin and obey Jesus. And yet I want to mention one more blessing.

We have a community of others with us

As if all that we’ve seen to this point weren’t enough, there’s more. The author of Hebrews informs them about Timothy and others in verses 23-24, writing, “You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Great all your

leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.” Now, when you read that, you could be tempted to say, “Why would he think they’d care about Timothy or believers in Italy, and why did he think that the pastors and all the church members would be eager to get his greeting?” Well, the answer is in one word in verse 23. He writes, “You should know that our *brother . . .*”

You see, when the Lord made you his own, reconciled you to himself, forgave your sins, gave you new hearts, and put his Spirit within you, he didn’t do all of this to then leave you as an isolated child of God. He did this while also making you part of a family. He not only reconciles us to himself when he saves us but unites us with other believers, some who are pastors, some who are in Italy, and some who are named “Timothy.” And there are many, many others—all of whom are your brothers and sisters in Christ.

So in this letter addressed to a people who were thinking, “I’m not sure I can keep persevering in obedient faith and faithfulness to Jesus,” the author reminds them in these glorious last few verses why they can. Just consider all of these blessings, and then remember that you have one another. We get to live this Christian life, persevering in faith, with others—with a family. Don’t lose sight of all of these glorious realities that are yours in Christ. And so, what is the application then of this final section of Hebrews?

Let us, then, obey this brief letter

That’s what the author says. It’s right there in the middle of these final verses. He writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly” (v. 22). Consider Jesus always so that you don’t drift (2:1; 3:1). Exhort one another every day so that we’re not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (3:13). Hold fast to our confession, drawing near to God’s throne in prayer and living in the reality that he is with us (4:14-16). Consider how to stir one another up to good works, not neglecting to meet together (10:24). Look to Jesus so that you don’t grow weary (12:2-3). Stand strong under your heavenly Father’s formative discipline, knowing he is working it in you to strengthen you and make you like his Son (12:12-17). Love one another, show hospitality, flee immorality, honor marriage, keep your life free from the love of money, obey those who oversee your souls, pray for them, and never lose sight of the sufficiency of Christ for you (13:1-19). And apparently the author of Hebrews could have said much, much more. He has written “briefly,” he tell us. But in light of these glorious realities we’ve been reminded of in these final verses, how can our response be anything other than, “Of course, by faith we will walk in persevering obedience to our Lord”? Let us visibly show that response now as we come to the table. Amen.