

HEBREWS THIRTEEN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 7, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most meaningful books of the New Testament is the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews was likely written by the apostle Paul, though we cannot know with absolute certainty. Neither do we know with absolute certainty from what point it was written nor even specifically to whom it was written. It was written to God's people, though we cannot designate the exact city to which it was originally directed. But none of this matters for we know that it was written by one of God's inspired servants and its message has meant a great deal to a great many people through a great many centuries.

I wish there were time for me to sketch a number of the highlights in the book leading up to the passage that I want to study with you, but time does not permit us to do more than make just a suggestion along this line. You do remember, I think, how the book begins. "God having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son." (Heb. 1:1-2). Is that not a wonderful beginning for any book? God has spoken to us through his Son Jesus Christ.

The second chapter begins with a very meaningful statement, "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Heb. 2:1-3). The answer is that there is no escape if we drift from or neglect these words of God. Through the other chapters of the book there are many other passages of great spiritual strength. The eleventh chapter particularly I would mention. There is the "hall of faith" mentioning so many of God's Old Testament heroes. Surely we need to read that regularly.

Summary of Christian Duties

It is the final chapter, chapter 13, however, that I have chosen for our particular study. This chapter of Hebrews is a summary of all, or nearly all, of the Christian duties. It is a summary that we need often to review. The first six verses of the chapter speak about some social duties that we Christians have. Hebrews 12:1-2 mentions Christian hospitality. "Let love of the brethren continue. Forget not to show love unto strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." "Let love of the brethren continue" implies that it is already begun. The admonition here is to let it grow.

I would suggest, as a very practical means of letting Christian fellowship grow, our getting together more often than we do. Perhaps we can come together for a meal in one of our homes to spend an evening with kindred spirits talking, at least part of the time, about God's work. These evenings are precious memories, when they are past; these evenings are happy experiences while they last. We love the people we eat with. Do you not feel a need for eating more often with the children of God? In our busy, rushed world we do not often enough visit in each other's homes to share with each other the great hopes and plans that we have for the church.

But our eating should not be exclusively with each other, for our text says, "Forget not to show love unto strangers." Somehow, when I think of this passage I cannot help but think of Luke's 14th chapter which contains the great but disturbing paragraph in which Jesus says, "When thou makest a dinner or supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor rich neighbors; lest haply they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee." In other words, we are to expect no spiritual blessing from God because we entertain each other. There are other blessings, yes, but we get no credit from God for feeding someone who does not need to be fed. "But when thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; because they have not wherewith to recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed in the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14). How many of us can point even to one occasion when we took the poor, the maimed, the blind and the halt into our homes and shared with them our bounty?

Our text begins by emphasizing Christian hospitality. Immediately it turns to Christian sympathy. "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; them that are ill treated, as being yourselves also in the body." Our hearts must go out to the suffering people of the earth in Christian sympathy. Then our passage turns to Christian purity in the next sentence, "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." In our day, a day of lax morals, this admonition from the scripture needs to be repeated that Christians may not be pulled away by the lust of the flesh into the sins that destroy men's souls. The Bible speaks plainly and thereby it has power. Let marriage be had in honor among all.

Next, we turn to a matter of trust in God and an absence of the yearning for the material things of the world. Instead of coveting, we are simply to be content with what we have. But let the scriptures say it, "Be ye free from the love of money; content with such things as ye have: for himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee. So that with good courage we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: what shall man do unto me?" The Christian, then, is one who has as near as is humanly possible a freedom from anxiety about the temporal or physical things of life. Remember the statement in David's 37th psalm, the 25th verse,

“I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” These words fit beautifully with this passage in Hebrews 13.

Religious Duties

Six verses talk about our social responsibilities. Now, beginning in verse 7, our religious duties are mentioned. The first has to do with our duties as related to those who have taught us in the past. “Remember them that had the rule over you, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith.” Think of the elders whose shadows of influence have fallen across our lives--elders in the past, elders now present. Think of those who taught Bible classes in which we have learned the way of the Lord. Think of those who have preached. Think of all those, not just in this generation but back through the years, whose spiritual encouragement and teaching have helped us reach our present state of Christian achievement. Imitate their faith.

Next comes one of the great sentences of the whole Bible, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever.” We change; our moods change; our problems change. Sometimes we are discouraged and despondent; sometimes we are happy. Is it not wonderful to know that Christ is always in reach, whatever our need and whatever our mood. He has been near to man through all the centuries. He was as near to the people who needed him in the second century as he is now. He will be near to all men as long as time lasts, never changing, always loving, always ready.

In the verses that follow, some five of them, we have a contrast between the Old Testament sacrifices and the New Testament sacrifices, or in effect, it is a contrast between the sacrifice of the flesh--animal sacrifices--and the supreme sacrifice of all--the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. “Be not carried away by divers and strange teachings: for it is good that the heart be established by grace; not by meats, wherein they that occupied themselves were not profited. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat that serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he sanctify the people through his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.” This is a passage worthy of extended study, but not for this occasion. The contrast is very great when the animal sacrifices which were offered on an altar of fire just outside the camp are set beside the sacrifice of Christ who died on a cross just outside the Jerusalem gate. How superior Christianity is to the law of Moses with its sacrifices.

Our Sacrifices

Next, what is expected of us? “We have not here (that is on this earth) an abiding city, but we seek after the city which is to come, (meaning we should go outside the gate, be willing to leave this world and its transient physical things, and go outside the gate). Through him then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to his name.” We think first of singing, but good, pure, constructive speech every day and every week is meant also. “But to do good and communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” Our sacrifices, then, are not blood sacrifices of animals, but our sacrifices are the fruit of lips. doing good and communicating to the needs of our fellow men. With such sacrifices God is pleased; these are our 20th century sacrifices.

Then, we are to respect and love and be directed by our elders. “Obey them that have the rule over you, (talking about the elders of the church) and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give an account.” This is frightening for an elder to read. He is to watch in behalf of the souls of the congregation, because some day he must give an account. Then it says, “That they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you.” We are to help them. We are to so heed their admonitions that some day when they must give an account for us, when we must give an account for ourselves, they may do it happily rather than with regret.

At this point, the great writer of the book of Hebrews turns and asks for the prayers of the Christians to whom he is writing, “Pray for us: for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience, desiring to live honorably in all things.” I never receive a request from someone for prayer but that I am grateful for the request. Sometimes they come by phone, sometimes it is someone at the door as we leave the church building who says, “Will you pray for me?” or “Will you pray for my family this week; we face a difficult problem.” Here this great inspired writer is saying, “Pray for us.” Then he says, “I exhort you the more exceedingly to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.” A specific request for prayer, “Pray that I may come more quickly.”

A Benediction

Having asked their prayers, he includes a great benediction for them--and us. “Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of an eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, make you perfect in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.” This benediction is his prayer for us that God may make us perfect in every good thing. He closes with the phrase, “To whom be the glory for ever and ever.” That is worship!

Throughout the Bible there are these great benedictions, or prayers. One that I am sure you have read and appreciated is near the end of Paul's first Thessalonian letter. There in chapter 5, beginning in verse 23, we find, "And the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and make your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." In the Old Testament we find the classic of these great benedictions. I guess it is in a sense the favorite of many, "Jehovah bless thee; Jehovah lift up his countenance unto thee, and give thee peace." (Num. 6:24-26). This has been echoed by the Jewish race thousands and thousands of times down through the centuries, and it is still a great prayer that we Christians can pray. God be gracious unto thee. God give thee peace. As you and I pray so often we touch only the outer edges of prayer, but as we think of these great benedictions of the Bible we are inspired to pray more effectively.

This great 13th chapter of Hebrews comes to its close with a few personal suggestions, "I exhort you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation: for I have written unto you in few words. (Really it is not few at all, it is 13 chapters. We consider it a long letter, but it is few when we think of the great subjects he has discussed and how much more he might have said). Know ye that our brother Timothy hath been set at liberty (That is good news; Timothy is no longer in prison); with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. (Do you feel the joy? The readers would say, "O, he may soon be here." I cannot help but say, "Let us transfer that phrase and think of our Lord who may soon be here.") Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. (Salute the elders and all the Christians). They of Italy salute you." We cannot know whether he was writing from Italy or some other place, or whether from some other place he was writing to Italy, saying, "Those who formerly lived with you in Italy but now are here send their greetings back to you." We cannot know for sure who wrote it, nor from what particular place nor to what group, but this book is from God and this great chapter is such a summary of Christian duties that it lifts us up to a higher life.

Then comes the last line, "Grace be with you all, Amen." Is it not wonderful to have a Bible like we have to strengthen us? Is it not wonderful to be a Christian? If you are not a Christian, you are invited to come, confess your faith in Christ this very moment, repent of your sins, be baptized and then follow the directions of your Lord toward heaven. Will you come?