

Hebrews, Part 12

Epilogue

The Epilogue can be distinguished from the body of the epistle in that the latter contains only broad, general admonitions, while the Epilogue contains specific ones. In some ways, these specific instructions suggest ways “to worship God acceptably”. The Epilogue also contains the writer’s personal comments to his readers and his farewell to them.

As we said previously, chapter 11 is the faith chapter, chapter 12 is the hope chapter, and chapter 13 is the love chapter. Another outline that has been suggested is Chapter 10 is the Christian’s privilege, chapter 11 is the Christian’s power, chapter 12 is the Christian’s progress, and Chapter 13 is the Christian’s practice.

Heb 13:1 Let brotherly love continue.

The first section of the Epilogue contains moral directions for the readers. Obeying these would inculcate personal kindness to brothers. “Brotherly love” should be translated as “brother love”. While the target audience for this epistle is primarily to Hebrews, what the author has to say has application to all of us. Jew and Gentile have been brought together in one body and the glue that holds us together is brother love. We are not to love like brothers but because we are brothers, and we are to love one another.

The Christian life is a life of faith and love. “Let brother love continue.” Now here is stranger love –

Heb 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.

The circumstances of the time made private hospitality almost a necessity for travelers. Your friendly Red Roof and Motel 6 were impossible to find. The underlying Greek of “to entertain strangers” implies that virtue was being neglected. The term “entertain strangers” in Greek really means to be hospitable.

The word “angel,” which means “messenger,” may refer to superhuman beings who are messengers of God. But this same word is also used to refer to human beings who were the seven “leaders” of the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. I believe the author intends that the “angels” here are human messengers; that is they are teachers or leaders of the churches being addressed by this epistle. The basic thought is we are to be hospitable to others, and thus recognize that there are those around us who could be very helpful.

The illustration seems to be that we only observe the outside surface of those whom we receive. More lies beneath that we don't see. Christ can often be found in the least of those who are welcomed in His name.

Heb 13:3 Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.

This sounds very much like a quote by Paul who experienced being a prisoner himself. The writer points out that the recipients have “been there” in the sense they have suffered mistreatment. With that experience, they should be sympathetic to the plight of others and seek to encourage and uplift them.

The Greek for “remember” means to be mindful. This brother love is not something limited to the church itself. They should also consider the saint who is in prison or sick at home and in need of an encouraging visit.

Heb 13:4 Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.

The statement “marriage is honorable for all” sounds like a condemnation of asceticism. Marriage is honorable and sex should be exercised in the framework of a marriage. God gave marriage for the welfare of mankind. It brings order to a culture. The attacks on and the breakdown of marriage in our culture are evidenced by a breakdown in law and order. Today many teens, unmoored from family life, are functionally insane. If not already so, many will grow up to be criminals.

Gal 6:7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption...

Simple respect for the persons of others is lacking, and single-parent families where that one parent must work to support the family have resulted in generally unsupervised and undisciplined children growing up with little or no moral guidance and ending up a member of an overflowing prison population.

Heb 13:5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

The word "conduct" translated as "conversation" in some translations means your manner of life. We should not be "covetousness" (lovers of money) but content with what God has blessed us with. You may not be a millionaire but we have God, and He will never leave us or forsake us.

Heb 13:6 So we may boldly say:
"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear.
What can man do to me?"

This statement may have been predictive of the events soon to come. Jews in the area of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria were about to face punishment and trials as a result of the attack by the Romans and the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 only a few years after this epistle was written. The Lord was not going to forsake the recipients of this epistle, but He was their helper and they need not fear what man would do to them. They need only to maintain their faith in that.

Concluding Religious Directions

Heb 13:7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Religious directions follow the moral ones, and this segment of the Epilogue extends through verse 17. The call, “Remember those who rule over you” likely refers to their spiritual leaders. The term “those who rule” refers primarily to a leader with an emphasis here on leadership. These “leaders” have “spoken the word of God” to them, implying these were pastors and teachers.

If this is used in the sense that their faith was a testimony it could be referring to the “faith leaders,” those great examples of faith previously expounded upon in the faith chapter (Heb 11). I tend to lean toward this explanation since we are given the sense that they are dead.

How do we know they are deceased? “Outcome” is *ekbasis* and means an egress or way out and, or a way of escape. Applied figuratively to the way of escape from temptation it is referring to the end of one’s life. Here in Hebrews, it refers not only to the end of physical life but the manner in which they closed a well-spent life as exhibited by their spirit in dying. “Conduct,” or “conversation” in some translations, refers to their manner of life. “Considering the outcome of their conduct” seems to be referring to how they lived and died as a testimony to their witness for God. This recognizes the living power of a great example.

The word translated as “considering” means to look attentively to and implies not just a passing consideration but looking closely at the details. They are to pay close attention to the witness of these deceased leaders.

Heb 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

“Jesus Christ” – no word in Scripture is used carelessly. “Jesus” is His human name. “Christ” is His title that speaks of His deity and His messianic mission to this Earth. “Jesus” is the name that links Him with mankind. People crowded around Him because He was so human and approachable. The crowds loved Him. It was the person of Christ that had so much appeal, but His teachings, they hated.

Jesus Christ is the same in His character, His person, and in His attributes. But He is not the same in His place or His performance. The immediate thought appears to be that as Christ had brought victory to His “leaders” so

He would also do in the present trials experienced by the readers. Those leaders were gone, but Jesus Christ of whom they spoke remains continuously the same “yesterday, today, and forever”.

Heb 13:9 Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.

These “various and strange doctrines” seem to have been various adaptations of Jewish thoughts and practices to Christianity. The readers had imported certain practices associated with the Law into their Christian faith, mixing works with grace, something Paul warned against in Romans and Galatians. The tense of “do not be carried” in Greek implies a present danger. There was a real possibility these Hebrews could be carried away by these practices from the true course of the Christian life.

The attractiveness of the unusual practices which endangered the faith of the Hebrews lay in their promise of security. No true stability can be gained by outward observances to which Judaizing and Jewish teachings lead. Stability must come from a spiritual, divine influence. In the sentence structure, there is a strong emphasis on the idea of “grace”. Our strength must come from without, and “grace” is the free outflow of divine love for the quickening and support of man.

Most cults today go in for special diets. The statement “foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them” gives every indication this bunch was focused on the dietary aspects of Law-keeping. The author is clearly stating that such dietary observances did no spiritual good. The faith of the Christian is in a Person and not in doctrines about Him. That is why new doctrines which conflict with the unchanging message about Jesus Christ should be rejected.

The author’s reference here to all kinds of strange teachings does not sound like a reference to normative Judaism, but as if the readers were confronting a peculiar, sectarian variation of that religion.

Heb 13:10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.

If some people preferred a desert way of life and considered themselves “servants” of the ancient Tabernacle, they were, the writer pointed out, debarred from Christian privileges. But “we have an altar”. We have that which furnishes us with a feast upon a sacrifice.

There is but one sacrifice for the Christian and one means of support, the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross and the participating in Him (John 6:53 ff.). The only earthly “altar” is the Cross on which Christ offered Himself. Christ is the offering. He is Himself the feast of the believer. In this sacrament then, where Christ Himself gives His Body and Blood, the Christian has that which more than fulfills the types of the Jewish ritual.

We Christians have an altar, from which we draw the material for our feast. In respect of this, our privilege is greater than that of a priest or high priest under the Levitical system. The Christian therefore who can “partake” of Christ is admitted to a privilege unknown under the Old Covenant.

Heb 13:11 For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.

The Lord truly man—the sin-offering for humanity—so that He might so fulfill the symbolism of the Law and sanctify the people by His Blood, “suffered outside the gate”. Under the old institution, the blood from sacrifices made on the Day of Atonement was brought into the most holy place, but the bodies were burned outside the camp (v. 11), a location deemed unholy in the years of the wilderness sojourn. But Jesus also suffered outside the city gate (i.e., outside Jerusalem) because He was a sin offering, but the effect of His sacrifice was to make the people holy.

Even as the Levitical high priest entered into the Sanctuary through the blood of the atoning victims while their bodies were burnt without, Jesus, as our High Priest, entered through His own Blood into heaven; and His mortal Body, laid in the grave, was glorified, consumed, so to speak, by the divine fire which transfigured it. In both respects, He satisfied completely the thoughts suggested by the type.

By His death on the Cross Christ not only “purged our sins,” (1:3), but He also “sanctified” His people – set them apart as His own. In the offering of Himself, He offered them also, as wholly devoted to God. The readers were in fact “holy” (or sanctified; cf. 2:11; 10:10, 14) and should not hesitate to share in the disgrace He bore (cf. 12:2) by abandoning the camp of Judaism and identifying with Him.

Heb 13:13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

The writer is saying to these Hebrews that they should not mind leaving the Temple or the rituals. Those things are not helpful. If the readers were acquainted with sectarian encampments in their region, this exhortation would have had special force. The point being made is Christians are now called upon to withdraw from Judaism even in its first and purest shape. It had been designed by God as a provisional system, and its work was done. Any attempt to abandon reality in favor of the type could only result in spiritual failure. What the Old Covenant offered was no longer available, and the New Covenant offered so much more.

Heb 13:14 For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.

The readers’ true home was no camp or city that then existed, but the city that is to come (cf. 11:10, 16; 12:22). The writer makes it clear that we have nothing permanent down here. They are to keep their focus on Christ and Heavenly Jerusalem.

Heb 13:15 Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. 16 But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Our sacrifice, our participation in Him, involves more than suffering for His sake. It is also an expression of thanksgiving, of praise to God, and of service to man. No blood sacrifices were needed in the light of Jesus’ death, but “to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well

pleased". A spiritual sacrifice must find an outward expression. Service to men is praise to God.

A child of God is a priest today and can bring sacrifices to God. There are four sacrifices for a believer.

1. You can sacrifice your person. Rom 12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Someone once said, "When one truly gives himself to the Lord, all other giving comes easy."
2. You can sacrifice your purse. 2 Cor 8:1 "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. 3 For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5 And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."
3. You can offer the sacrifice of praise. Heb 13:15 "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name."
4. You can offer the sacrifice of performance or doing good which is found in Heb 13:16 "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

Heb 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

If former leaders were to be remembered and their teachings retained (vv. 7–8), present leaders were also to be obeyed. Their responsibility before God was to be recognized. Their shepherding included seeing to your spiritual growth, and their shepherding tasks should not be complicated by your disobedience.

James 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

If your pastor is a man of God who teaches the Word of God, then you are to obey the Word of God as he has given it to you. They will have to stand before Christ our Judge at the Bema judgment seat and give an account for their responsibilities as shepherds. And so shall we stand before Christ the Judge and give an account of what we did with what we were taught. That their work will be with joy, so should their accounting to God for us may also be with joy.

Prayer Requested

Heb 13:18 Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably. 19 But I especially urge you to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.

With that same sense of spiritual humility that led him to use “we” in most of his warning sections, the writer requested the prayers of his readers and particularly that he might be restored to them soon. His interest in them was personal, and he was eager to see them.

Benediction, Final Exhortation, Farewell

Heb 13:20 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.

In a lovely benediction that captures a number of the major themes of the epistle (e.g., peace, blood, covenant, Resurrection, Shepherd, equip), the writer expressed confidence in our Lord Jesus as the Great Shepherd of New Covenant people, through whom God was able to effect His will in the readers and in himself. This indeed is what he prayed for his readers.

Heb 13:22 And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words.
23 Know that our brother Timothy has been set free, with whom I shall see you if he comes shortly.

24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.

25 Grace be with you all. Amen.

Urging once again that his readers bear with his word of exhortation, he expressed the hope that he and Timothy would soon see them. After giving them greetings, he committed them to God's grace.

Summation:

The key to the correct interpretation of Scripture and especially Hebrews is the context:

- That can include its historical context or what was going on around the time of the passage under study that could have influenced or shaded what the author is trying to say.
- One should also consider the cultural context: that is how the people of that time experienced life and observed social customs.
- One must also keep in mind that there may be different ways to translate a passage or even a word, and these differences can sometimes radically influence its interpretation. Consulting different translations and comparing them as well as exploring keywords in the original Greek or Hebrew can often be enlightening. Words can often be translated in different ways and sometimes these differences can be significant to the interpretation. A good example is the English word "if". There are four ways of expressing "if" in Greek, and each of them has a different meaning, but all four are translated as "if" in English.
- And finally, one must consider the passage's context. What is the subject and what has the author said before the study passage or after that could help in understanding its meaning? For example, the English word "save" can have several meanings that often can only be determined by the context. It can refer to being saved from the fires of Hell or being delivered through some trial or tribulation, or it can refer to our ultimate glorification when we are delivered from this life into eternity.

These Hebrews were considering abandoning grace for works. I know lots of Christians who have already made that trip. They will say, "Salvation is by grace, NOT works!" They will then turn around and abandon grace for works and say, "But you can lose your salvation through perpetual sinning,

or you can ‘renounce’ Christ and lose your salvation.” There is no way to parse that but to call it “salvation by works.” If you understand the context of Hebrews, there is no way you can arrive at an argument for that position. This is why context is so very important. The Epistle to the Hebrews is often badly interpreted because of the failure to understand the context.

It should be obvious that the recipients of the epistle were mainly Jews who were tending to apostasy. Under obvious pressure from fellow Jews, perhaps even some who were born again, they were leaning towards reverting to Judaism or had already incorporated some practices of Judaism into their new faith. The fact that they had expected the soon return of Jesus after His death, and He had not yet returned some 30+ years later, was a particular source of pressure for them. They are considering abandoning their faith in Christ as Messiah and returning to their ancestral religion – the Mosaic Covenant and observing the Law. The writer warns them that they cannot go back to the Law because it has been replaced by grace at the Cross and is no longer functional. If they attempt to do so, they will be putting themselves in a condition of perpetual sinfulness because they are, in effect, calling the Holy Spirit a liar who witnessed to them and led them to Christ. Through the sacrifices which were only a mere shadow of the Cross, they would be “crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt” (Heb 6:6). They will find no means of forgiveness through the “shadow” sacrifices for sin under the Law because those sacrifices have been replaced by a superior sacrifice, that of the reality of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

Heb 6:4 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

The writer warned them that to attempt to go back to the Law and to find “the fruits of repentance” (righteousness and forgiveness for their sins) through the Levitical offerings would be impossible because the Law was superseded by a New Covenant, one far superior to the Old Covenant. All

that was offered by the Law is no longer being offered. They can't go back because "back" isn't there anymore.

The writer charged the recipients with spiritual immaturity. They were yet still "babes in Christ" and still consuming "milk" when they ought to be consuming the red meat of spiritual maturity. When they should be teachers, they were still in need of instruction themselves. Lacking spiritual maturity, they were unable to discern right from wrong, implying they were susceptible to false teachings.

The author then made a series of arguments defending the High Priesthood of Christ over the high priests of the Levitical system, and how His one sacrifice was far superior to the many daily sacrifices of the Levitical system including the annual sacrifice for sin on Yom Kippur. To abandon the one superior sacrifice for the many inferior ones was not a solution.

The writer then argued for faith and demonstrated from Old Testament Scriptures, with which they were very familiar, how so many of their ancestors, men and women, had persisted in their faith in the face of resistance and had even gone to their graves still believing the promises made to them by God. Their faith should be a witness for them.

Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and the promised Kingdom was coming as He promised. The writer called for the recipients of the epistle to renew their faith in the promises and look forward and not backward. They can't go back because "back" isn't there anymore. There was only one way for them to go and that was forward. And forward offered so much more than "back" ever did. The superiority of faith and grace of the New Covenant over the legalism and works of the Old Covenant is the underlying theme of Hebrews.

Though this was written to Hebrews who were under pressure from their fellow Jews and considering abandoning their faith in Christ, it has application to Christians today. How many of us have faced scoffing, either openly or behind our backs, from our unbelieving friends when we give them the Gospel and tell them about all the marvelous promises from God? And how many of you have at least entertained the idea, even for just a

moment, that maybe you got it wrong? If you have ever experienced this, then you ought to understand some of the pressure these born-again Jews were dealing with from their friends and family who were not believers. The danger was very real for them, and it is also very real for us today. For them, the Cross was only a little over 30 years in their past, and already they were susceptible to abandoning their faith.