

Solomon says there is a time to laugh and a time to cry (Ecc 3:4).

This past Thanksgiving we enjoyed laughing with our relatives. We relived the funniest moments from the past and heard of humorous moments of their church in Appleton, WI. People are so funny, so creative.



But the Bible passage we are looking at is very serious. It is on par of Jesus' saying, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Lk 9:62 NIV).'

We have been going through **the book of Hebrews** verse by verse this fall, and today we look at the last chapter.

Our pastor / preacher was worried that his people would turn back to Judaism.

- It was easier.
- Though despised, it was recognized by Rome and not open to the same persecution of unauthorized Christianity.
- It was familiar and their families would be thrilled.
- The problem was, Jesus was better and fulfilled everything Judaism looked forward to.

Thank you for keeping up with this series. My prayer is that you will learn to enjoy the book on your own. Let's **catch everyone up**.

Hebrews is 'a strange and difficult book'¹ for several reasons.

It is 'strange and difficult' because ...

1. Five different cultures (Roman, Hebrew, Hellenists, Hellenistic Christians, and our culture).
2. It is a sermon to encourage people not to go back to Judaism because Jesus is better.

The preacher uses **symbols from ancient Judaism** to make his point that Jesus is better and God has a better future for us. This is a deeply theological book.

¹ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 710.

Minute Review

- Jesus is better than the angels, 1:4-2:18.
- Jesus is better than Moses & Joshua, 3:1-4:14.
- Jesus is better than the High Priest, 4:14-7:28.
- Jesus is better than the OT Covenant & Sacrifices, 8:1-10:18. He then encourages the people to ...
- Draw near and persevere, 10:19-39. Then the great chapter on faith.
- The essence of faith & OT heroes, 11:1-31. Even those of faith who suffered.
- Heroes who endured suffering, 11:32-12:3.
- Suffering leads to thanksgiving & worship, 12:4-29.

Today, the preacher gives *various* **final challenges**. He also has **two powerful word pictures**. The one that caught my attention is that we are strengthened by grace.

Something Better

Strengthened by Grace, 13:1-25



Let's jump in.

1. Living a Christian Life, 13:1-8.

'Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. ⁴ Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me (He 13:1-6 NIV)?"'

At first glance these seem rather **piecemeal**:

- **Love** one another.
- Show **hospitality**.
- Remember those in **prison**.
- Be sexually **pure**.
- Don't love **money**.

But if you look closer, what **ties these commands together** is community and family relationships. It is more than 'two are better than one (Ecc 4:9).'

- It is 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1Co 12:27 NIV).'

- Each one of you here today is a part of Jesus' glorious body here on earth, and if you go back to the world, that part of Jesus' body is missing.

He continues with 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (He 13:7-8 NIV).'

He will come back to spiritual leaders in just a moment.

We can love each other, take care of strangers and prisoners, remain pure, and have sufficient money to live on ... *because Jesus is with us and he does not change*. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

When we fix our thoughts on Jesus we are nourished by God's grace.

As happened so often in this sermon, we run into foreign concepts and word pictures. This time it is ceremonial food. It is our first word picture.

2. Strengthened by Grace, 13:9-16.

'Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. *It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace*, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat (He 13:9-10 NIV).'

We *don't know* what the '**strange teaching**' is, but it probably had to do with Jewish food traditions – ceremonial foods.²

- There are a **lot of strange teachings** out there. With social media, anyone can have an international platform without any study, credentials, or even truth. **Be careful**, go back to the primary sources to research what is true.
- Don't fall prey to **slick marketing**. Some of the preachers out there make me want to shake my head. They will stand before God for their greed and manipulation.

The **priests used to eat** the meat from the burnt offerings. It was one of **perks of their position** because they could not own land. But that is not the same as being refreshed by God's grace in Jesus' blood. That was the old system.

² It could be 'from a legalistic Christian movement attempting to reinstate Jewish food laws,' R.T. France in Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Revised Edition 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2006), 187.

‘Strengthened by grace’ is such a beautiful phrase.

- It is **wrong** to think of grace *only* as a gift we passively receive.
- For years **preachers have hammered** away at Paul’s ‘faith not by works (Ro 3:28).’ True, we cannot earn God’s grace. It is a gift.
- But Grace is **more than a onetime** prayer for salvation. Jesus said to ‘go and make disciples’ *not* decisions.
- Strengthening can be like muscles at a gym or nourishment our bodies take in. It is an **ongoing process** – discipleship.

Grace changes us.

- Think of the Samaritan women in John 4. Jesus told her about living water and that she had five husbands and was now living with a man. Jesus extended grace and dignity to her.
- Grace changed her. She went back to the village. The embarrassment of having so many husbands became her testimony to point others to Jesus. That touch point of grace transformed her – ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did (Jn 4:29 NIV).’
- When we fix our thoughts on Jesus we are nourished by God’s grace.

How does grace change us?

When I see the grace God has extended to me, and its cost to him, I change.

- I want to do better.
- ‘The grace of God ... *teaches* us to say “no” to ungodliness (Titus 2:11 NIV).’ **Grace schools us** in holiness because see our sin more clearly. Grace is our teacher.
- Last week I said **thanksgiving is a natural** response to grace, like thunder to lightning.

Like food nourishes our bodies, we are ‘strengthened by grace.’

God bless you. Some of you have listened to me for over a decade. You know when I am winding down. Our **preacher is winding down** this written sermon, but he has *one more* strong word picture from OT Judaism. ‘The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood (He 13:11-12 NIV).’

Let's examine **what he means** by inside / outside / camp. First, he imagines **Jesus** as the Day of Atonement sacrifice. He is mixing two parts of from Israel's past.

Day of Atonement parallel

- Internal organs of the sacrifice were burned *outside* of camp (Ex 29:14; Lev 4:12, 21) // Jesus was sacrificed outside of Jerusalem.
- Animal sacrifice made people holy // Jesus presented his own (pure) blood as a sin offering (He 9:11-28).

Tent of Meeting parallel

- The Golden Calf was so people could see their god (Ex 32:1), they rejected the unseen God.
- Afterwards, Moses set up a 'tent of meeting' outside the camp (Ex 33:7), the camp is no longer holy but profane.
- These *ancient Christians* were accused of **not having gods** because they had no sacrifice like the Romans or Jews.³ **Inside Judaism** they felt secure, there was a lot to see – sacrifices, altars, rituals, festivals. It would be easy to return to Judaism.
- Salvation is for those outside Judaism's camp, for those who willing to bear the shame of Jesus' cross.

'Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come (He 13:13-14 NIV).'

We 'must identify with the ... shame our high priest has undergone for' us.⁴

- This preacher offers no relief of suffering, they must 'embrace the "disgrace" ... as a part of their calling.'
- They must be an 'outlaw,' or a 'foreigner' to Judaism. We must live outside of our comfort zone. We have many internationals whom I consider brave for immigrating and dedicating their life to America. Like them, we must be brave to live differently than the world.
- This is the same as Jesus' call to 'take up your cross and follow me (Mk 8:34).'

³ 'Christians have none of the visible apparatus which in those days was habitually associated with religion and worship – no sacred buildings, now altars, no sacrificing priests. Their pagan neighbors thought they had no God, and called them atheists; their Jewish neighbors, too,' F.F. Bruce, *NICNT* Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Willam B. Eerdmans, 1990), 379.

⁴ France, *Expositor's*, 189.

- When we fix our thoughts on Jesus we are nourished by God's grace.

'Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (He 13:15-16 NIV).'

Rather than **animal sacrifice**, the **sacrifices of the Christ-follower** are to be a 'sacrifice of praise' and doing good. We are to vocalize praise, the 'fruit of our lips' that honors his name.

- Declaring God's greatness.
- Expressing our commitment to him.
- Doing good and sharing with others.

He is now giving his final thoughts and returns to spiritual leaders.

3. Spiritual Leaders, 13:17-19.

'Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. ¹⁸ Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. ¹⁹ I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon (He 13:17-19 NIV).'

Spiritual leaders must give an account of their leadership before God.

For the most part it is a joy to serve as your pastor. I love you deeply. Yes, there are some who keep me up at night with worry, others criticize out of ignorance, but that is just part of being a pastor.

Verse 17 literally reads 'that they may do this with joy and not groaning.'⁵ Groaning leaders are of no advantage to those they lead.

Good leaders are good followers. Healthy leaders will have healthy followers.

Now a prayer and personal greeting.

4. Prayer & Greeting, 13:20-25.

⁵ France, *Expositor's*, 191.

'Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (He 13:20-21 NIV).'

This is a **doxology**, a prayer that praises God and *highlights* his character.

These ancient texts and multiclaue sentences are **hard to read**.

- Let's skip the middle clauses and find the heart of this prayer.
- 'Now may the God of peace ... equip you with everything good for doing his will.'
- The clauses we skipped highlight the power of Jesus' resurrection by what he did on the cross.
- The last clause assures us that the same power is working in us to do God's will and please him

'Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly. ²³ I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. ²⁵ Grace be with you all (He 13:22-25 NIV).'

Conclusion.

Just as the ancient Hellenistic Christians in Rome were challenged to not go back to Judaism, let's not go back to our old habits and way of thinking because God has something better planned for us.

- When we fix our thoughts on Jesus we are nourished by God's grace.
- Keep running the life of faith, God has something better planned.

This has **been a delight** to go through the book of Hebrews with you. I feel like I really understand it for the first time.

But now that you know the background I hope you can enjoy it as much as I do.

What I would like to do for our conclusion today is read some of the great or golden passages out loud together.

'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word ...⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (He 1:3, 4 NIV).'

'We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away ... How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation (He 2:1, 3 NIV)?'

‘Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death ... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (He 2:14-15, 18 NIV).’

‘Fix your thoughts on Jesus (He 3:1 NIV).’

‘But encourage one another daily ... so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness (He 3:13 NIV).’

‘For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (He 4:12 NIV).’

‘Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (He 4:14-16 NIV).’

‘How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! ¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom ... ²² without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (He 9:14-15, 22 NIV).’

‘Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (He 9:27-28 NIV).’

‘Since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (He 10:21-25 NIV).’

‘But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved (He 10:39 NIV).’

‘Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see ... ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (He 11:1, 6 NIV).’

‘Since God had planned something better for us ... ^{12:1} Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (He 11:40-12:2 NIV).’

‘Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord (He 12:14 NIV).’

'Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire (He 12:28 NIV)."'

'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (He 13:8 NIV).'