

The City That Lasts

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Date: 27 December 2020

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[0 : 00] Our text is actually to be found in Hebrews 13. And I'm going to read Hebrews 13 from verse 10, which says this, or rather verse 9.

Hebrews 13, verse 9, do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by the eating of ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who observe such rituals.

We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. 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.

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore, for here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

When I was thinking about what to preach in the last Sunday of 2020, my mind did turn to Hebrews 13.

[1 : 56] Hebrews 13, chapter 14, chapter 14, for here have we no continuing city, as the AV would put it, but we seek one to come. However, as I was reading the context of that verse, I felt that it was appropriate to speak really part of that context as well as verse 14.

So we're going to be looking at verses 10 to 14 of Hebrews 13. Now, the letter of Hebrews is an exhortation.

The writer tells us that in verse 22 of this chapter, chapter 13. Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation.

So perhaps we could put the word letter in inverted commas. Now, this exhortation was given to first century Christians to exhort them to hold on to their Christianity in the face of persecution, strange teachings, and perhaps spiritual fatigue.

That surely makes it relevant to us, does it not? Perhaps we're not facing any significant overt persecution.

[3 : 35] There are many strange teachings, of course, in our society and in our culture. And there probably is, is there not, a degree of spiritual fatigue.

And that's why it makes it relevant, I believe, to us. Chapter 13 represents concluding remarks by the writer. And the remarks we are going to be looking at are related to the central danger for those believers who may be tempted to retreat back into their former Judaism or dabble with strange ideas related to it.

Let me just say, let me just say, let me just say, let me just say, at this point, and basically I've been giving my little introduction, which is just about finished. I trust that there's no one within our congregation who is in danger of retreating from the faith that they once professed.

There are four things that I wish to explore with you from these verses. Firstly, Christ, our altar. Secondly, where Christ's altar was erected. Thirdly, what is the route map to Christ's altar today?

[5 : 08] And fourthly, the supreme reason for the urgency of the writer's exhortation. Firstly, then, Christ, our altar.

Perhaps some of these people were, this is pure speculation by me, perhaps some of these people were saying things like, why did you give up the physical and material altar of sacrifice?

Because that's what an altar is. It's a place of slaughter and a place of sacrifice. Surely you're missing something.

I mean, these, some of these, certainly the Judaism of the time of the writer, the traditional Judaism would have been saying, you know, we've got our altar and we've got our sacrifices.

Perhaps people were saying something like that. And isn't it very interesting in verse 10 here that the writer says, we, that is, we followers of Jesus Christ, we Christians, we believers, have an altar. [6 : 33] Not we had an altar, or not that we will have an altar, but right here in the present, we have an altar.

Isn't that amazing? It isn't physical or material. It's not some holy, magnificent structure. Nor is it any longer the tent of meeting or the tabernacle. Our altar is Jesus Christ himself. The writer brings that out, does he not, at verse 12. And so, Jesus. And in verse 13, let us then go to Jesus.

And in verse 15, through Jesus. Therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. Yes, this is the first thing that this writer reminds the people that he's exhorting as he's, in his concluding remarks.

[7 : 41] Listen, he says to them. We have an altar. And that altar is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

He is our mercy seat. It's no longer a lid over the Ark of the Covenant, overlaid with gold. Our altar is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, our Lord. Jesus who's exalted at the right hand of God. And furthermore, he says, of this altar. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Now, these verses here in Hebrews 13, 10 to 14, they're a bit complex, believe it or not. And it's rather difficult to just exactly pin down exactly the meaning of the writer here.

[8 : 48] But I'm not going to get drawn into or involved in that, although I do have some personal views as to what the meaning is. But here's what he says.

Those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to partake of our altar. Those clinging on to the shadows and signs.

Those continuing. It's a bit like this. Like somebody looking at a picture of a building that you love. When the building is there for you to go and experience.

The irony, of course, is that Jesus is the antitype of all that was involved in Old Testament religion. And all of the sacrifices and the temple and everything about it. He is its fulfillment. In this moment, we have an altar.

[9 : 59] And those that still minister at the tabernacle have no right to benefit from it. The fire of the grace and mercy from this altar will never burn out.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not necessarily against a physical altar. But that's not the point. The physical altar is only a symbol and a sign.

Kissing it won't really make any difference. Kneeling before it won't make any difference. You know, I was listening to some operas on the television the other night.

And one of those operas was an Italian composer called Bellini. And it was called The Sleepwalker. And you know, when you're watching these operas on the television, the words that they're singing in Italian or whatever language it is that the opera's in. And these words come up for you.

[11 : 02] And these words came up as I was watching and listening to this. Let your joy begin as you kneel at the altar.

Let your joy begin as you kneel at the altar. And I would just add one thing to that.

These beautiful words that came up during that opera, the sleepwalker by Bellini. Make sure it's the altar of Christ that you're kneeling before.

The altar of Jesus of Nazareth. The altar of the Saviour and the Son of God. Then these words will be so true for you.

Your joy will begin as you kneel at the altar. But where was this altar, this altar of Christ constructed?

[12 : 01] There were so many instructions and regulations for the building and construction of the altar in the Old Testament. But where was this altar of Christ constructed?

And that leads me to my second point. It wasn't carved out in exquisite gold in one of the great cathedrals of our world.

Where then was the altar of Christ constructed? The writer tells us, does he not, by an allusion to the Old Testament, the temple ritual.

In verse 11, he tells us that the bodies are burned. And here are the key words. Outside the camp. And then he tells us in verse 12. So Jesus suffered outside the camp, the city gate, to make the people holy through his own blood.

[13 : 13] Jesus Christ is the greatest outsider that there ever was in this world. We heard about something of that this morning.

We heard although he had made creation and all creatures, and that he was their source and spring of life, and yet they would not receive him.

And of course, it was more ghastly than that, wasn't it? They cast him out. He was given a death of execution by the Roman justice, which was reserved for the worst of criminals.

Not for Jesus, who is our altar and mercy seat, a civil death such as Socrates. No, he is cast out to Golgotha, the place of a skull.

He is cast out from those that were his own within the camp of Judaism, within those that looked for the Messiah, and perhaps some longed for the Messiah.

[14 : 37] And when he came, they cast him out. He became the great outcast and outsider in order that we, who are the real outsiders, might be brought inside the warmth and love of God's mercy.

The world he came to redeem cast him out as if he were the scum of the air. But the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it.

And that light has shone in millions and millions of people, shining even in that place where he was cast out, Golgotha and the cross.

Remember the soldier? Remember one of the thieves? No matter how dark the darkness, that enveloped Christ, the light still shone.

Here is the irony or the paradox.

[16 : 01] As I said, you and I are spiritually outsiders. Yet, in order to get inside to that warmth and love of God, as Bill was talking about this morning, that we might be brought into the family as adopted children.

You know, in order for that to happen, we too need to go outside. Just as Jesus had to suffer outside to bring us inside, the eternal love of the Father, and so too, if we want to get to Jesus, we need to go outside.

And this brings me to my third point. What is the route map to this altar? You know, before the era of mobile phone navigation, I used to just type in AA route maps, and I would get my directions to my destination from doing that.

Nowadays, it's much easier. I've got navigation, as most people have, on my mobile phone. But what are the directions?

What are the navigational directions for people to reach the altar of Jesus Christ? Well, they're stated there in verse 13, which says this, Let us then go to him outside the camp.

[17 : 48] Now, of course, originally when these words were written by the writer in his exhortation, it's no doubt a reference to those people that are thinking of retreating back into the camp of Judaism.

But it's got a larger reference, I'm sure you'll agree, than that. Let us then, says the writer, go to him outside the camp.

And that's the first thing. Go to him. We need to be intentional. We need to go to him.

Spiritually. And willingly. And with our whole being. And we need to keep going to him.

It's not just a question of going to him initially, but it's a question of going to him again and again and again.

[19 : 05] Outside the camp. This is what the writer says. Go to him outside the camp. That's where the mercy seat is. That's where he can be found. That is to say, even all religions or churches, where Jesus Christ is not at the center, we must go to where he is.

We must be willing to be outsiders with him. And what does that mean? It means, as the writer tells us, in that same verse, bearing the disgrace he bore.

And what disgrace Jesus bore. I don't need to articulate it all for you, but you know, you've read the Gospels, and you know the disgrace that he bore.

Well, says the writer, if you want to get to this mercy seat of Jesus, you too must go to him outside the camp, bearing his disgrace.

The disgrace of the cross, the curse of the cross, the disgrace of this man who dared to say, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[20 : 29] Yes, there is no such thing as cross. There is no such thing as crossless Christianity. Can I ask what holds us back to going to Christ?

If you're one of those people that haven't gone to him, could it be a besetting sin? Could it be a career?

A hobby? Could it be the case that it's nothing in particular except perhaps the magnetic pull of the world and our own desire to hold on to the reins of our life?

Listen to Simone Weill, the French brilliant thinker who died in 1945, just in her early 30s.

I quote her, an attachment to a particular thing can only be destroyed by an attachment which is incompatible with it.

[21 : 37] Bearing his disgrace, carrying his cross, going outside to where he is, often outside religions, often outside physical altars, dare I say, perhaps often outside some of the great cathedrals.

So as we think of Christ, our altar, and his sacrifice, and that altar, and the disgrace he bore for you and I, what would be a good motto or creed to predicate our entire life on as we pass through this world as pilgrims?

And that brings me to my final point. It is that verse 14, the one that originally I thought I might construct an entire sermon on.

For here, we do not have an enduring city. The writer is saying, here's why I'm saying all this to you. Here's why I'm exhorting you.

Here's the supreme reason for my exhortation. For here, we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

[23 : 22] Now, I read from Hebrews 11, and it spoke there about Abraham and others that were looking for a city whose builder and foundation is gone.

And the city is part of what I would call a mix, mixed metaphors. You'll see that he mentions a country in Hebrews, and he mentions a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

These are all mixed metaphors of the spiritual reality that characterizes Jesus Christ and his people.

And you know, there's a strong little adversity in this verse 14. And it's intensifying the meaning of the verse.

It's saying, not this, but this is what we ought to be about. The city metaphor is perhaps partly, at least, a symbol and metaphor for the place and the presence and the provision of God.

[24 : 51] But you see, the big point here is there is nothing lasting in this city that we are traveling through. Let me say that again. There is nothing lasting in this city, in this country, in this kingdom, in this realm, in this life that we're walking through as pilgrims.

And you know, that same lady, Simone V, she said that, I've quoted this before to you, but it's a powerful quotation. In one of her books, she says, in this life, we possess nothing.

In this life, we possess nothing. And I'm sure she meant, she didn't explain it, but I'm sure she meant in the blink of an eye, everything that we possess can be snatched away from us.

Have we not seen something of that in this pandemic? thing. But then, says the writer, that means that our secular life, and I don't use the word secular negatively there, I just mean our ordinary life, going about every day, our work, our school, our university, our friends, our hobbies, our things that we like in life, can be snatched out of our grasp and our clutch.

Our self-life, I don't use the word self here in a negative way, just, I mean, our health, our hobbies, and so on.

[26 : 57] But there's another way to look at this, that there's a wee positive even in that first half here have we no continuing city.

Suffering. It won't continue, it won't last. Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

But the other big point is, it is the city that is in the process of coming, that's how you could interpret that literally, that we need to place our focus on and live for, indeed, the word seek in that half of that, the second half of that, verse 14, is an intense form, verbal form of that word.

And it's saying, remember when we were reading from Hebrews 11, they were looking forward, they were longing, they were living for the city that continues eternally.

I close with this. in chapter 12, we read this, that Jesus, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising shame.

[28 : 39] Let me go back to the quote from the Bellini Opera. let your joy begin as you kneel at his altar.

Yes, as we come to Christ in this life, as we go to him, our joy begins. But you know, as we see him, as we reach home, enter into his nearer presence, what joy that will be.

There it is then, we have an altar, said the writer, his name is Christ. But you know, to get to that altar, we need to go outside, to where he is, bearing his reproach.

But when we kneel at that altar, both now and as we get home, our joy will be unspeakable. May the Lord then bless these thoughts to each one of us for his glory and for our good.