

Farewell Sermon

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Date: 29 August 2021

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Let's pray as we come to God's Word. Father, thank you for the privilege of listening to your Word preached among these people and in this place for the last two decades of my life. And thank you for the honor of proclaiming you.

We pray that your Spirit would fill me and that you would fill all of our hearts as we listen and receive what you have for us today. Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, before I jump into the sermon, I want to thank you all for your support and provision of our sabbatical this summer.

My family and I spent the month of July driving to Montana and back. Yeah, it was over 6,000 miles. And along the way, we visited a few people who had played sort of key roles in our spiritual lives in different seasons.

So we visited the woman who had led Jane, my wife, to Christ in high school. She lives in Wisconsin with her family. We also visited the couple who are our campus ministers with InterVarsity in college and our mentors afterwards when I was working for InterVarsity.

And we spent a week in Montana with one of Jane's college friends, a bridesmaid at our wedding, who also worked with me on InterVarsity staff. And so this trip gave us many opportunities to look back on different seasons of our lives and think about the people that God had placed alongside us and to lead us and to mentor us and to walk with us.

[1:34] At the same time, this trip was a new adventure into places we had never been. Driving through the Great Plains and seeing the mountains, I thought it was clouds.

And then I realized they were the mountains, if you've ever been on that drive on I-90. And for me, driving through the sort of vast prairies and then seeing the towering mountain peaks gives a particular sense of how small we are before the majesty and the wisdom of our Creator God.

You know, we get to live in this world, we get to study it, we get to—we're responsible to maintain it, but we didn't make it and we don't ultimately control it. And I think when you're in the middle of God's vast creation, that's an impression that is valuable to hold on to.

So our trip this summer helped us to look back on God's faithfulness in the past and to anticipate the next stage in our journey as we move to leading a new church. So thank you for giving us that time. It was a blessing to us.

This morning, I want to give you some parting words from the Scriptures. Now I realize some of you are—it's maybe your first time here, or you're new to town, or you're new to the church, and you don't know me from Adam. So the fact that I'm leaving, it doesn't register high on your radar.

[2:49] But I think that these words, first of all, they're from the Bible, so they are—all Scripture is useful for helping all of us in any situation.

But I think particularly they'll speak to any of you who are in any kind of transition or change or sort of looking towards a new future, a new season. So I said back in June, whenever we're facing any significant transition, any loss or change, any new challenge or opportunity, the Scriptures encourage us to look back on God's faithfulness, and consider what we can learn from the past, as well as to look forward with trust and hope in God's unchanging character and God's unshakable promises.

So that's what I want to do today. So if you turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11, I want to look at a few words from the last three chapters of Hebrews. Now, if you have read the book of Hebrews, you might know the main theme of this book in the New Testament is the unparalleled greatness of Jesus.

So for the first ten chapters, the author unpacks this theme and emphasizes it over and over. So he starts by demonstrating that Jesus is greater than the angels, than all the heavenly beings.

He rules and commands them all. And then he goes on to say that Jesus is greater than all human leaders, greater than all the previous leaders that God has sent to his people.

[4:15] He's a prophet greater than Moses. He's a priest greater than Aaron. And he's a king greater than David. So you see these themes woven through the book of how Jesus is our great high priest and sort of God's final word to us.

And finally, that he's a better sacrifice. He's the ultimate atoning sacrifice who makes a way for us to be cleansed from our sins once and for all, to come freely and fully into the presence of God without any hindrances and without needing anything other than him.

So for ten chapters, the author of Hebrews eloquently unfolds the unparalleled greatness of Jesus. And then in the concluding chapters of the book, he gives some very practical instructions about what it looks like to live a life of faith.

That is of trust and looking to Jesus. How to move forward by faith in Christ. So I want to look at three key truths. One's in chapter 11. One's in chapter 12.

One's in chapter 13 this morning. So first truth is found in chapter 11. And I want to read chapter 11, verses 1 and 2, and then 8 to 10, and then 13 to 16.

[5:25] So let me read these verses. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.

Going down to verse 8. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out not knowing where he was going.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise, for he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Verse 13. These all died in faith. Not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return, but as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

[6:35] Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. So the truth that we see in this part of chapter 11 is that God's people are always pilgrims.

Now Abraham is the particular example that verses 8 through 10 highlight, and one of the pivotal moments in Abraham's life recorded in Genesis chapter 12 is when God calls him to leave behind his ancestral homeland, to leave behind the previous source of his security and identity and belonging, and to move to a new land that he had never been to and had no previous connections in.

And verse 9 says it was by faith in God's promises that Abraham obeyed God's command to embark on that pilgrimage. And then in verse 13 through 16, we see that this wasn't just an unusual pattern in Abraham's life, but there's a broader pattern in the lives of all the people of God through the ages.

Verse 13 says, These all, all the men and women of faith, acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth seeking a homeland. In other words, God's people are always pilgrims.

Now, this doesn't mean that followers of Jesus should be completely disconnected from the places where God puts us for a time. Right? God did not create us as disembodied spirits floating around and attached to nowhere in particular.

[8 : 05] No, he made us embodied creatures. He put us in a particular time, in particular places, so that we would inhabit those places fully as his image bearers. One example of when God's people were called to do this is in Jeremiah chapter 29 in the Old Testament.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon. And they were living in a strange and uncomfortable land, right? They had been captured and taken there, where they did not want to be.

And some of them were completely fed up with the Babylonian culture, and they just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. But God sent them an unexpected message.

If you read Jeremiah 29, it's... And his message was, Settle down, build a house, plant a garden, and raise your family. And seek the good of the city where I have sent you.

Pray for its flourishing, for in its flourishing you will find your flourishing. In other words, God was saying to his people, Invest in this place for as long as God keeps you there.

[9 : 15] One church we visited this summer described their mission in four words. It's gospel, community, worship, and place.

Right? Now the first three are sort of what you expect to hear from a good, solid church, right? The gospel is at the center of what we believe, the good news of Jesus Christ. Worshiping God is our central...

It's sort of what gathers us together each Sunday. Community is what we want to build together. But I thought that was an interesting way to put their fourth commitment, place. And they described it this way. We seek rootedness in a transient culture.

We seek to engage our city and its people on the common ground of love for this place. They were in Whitefish, Montana. It's a beautiful place. We call our members to consider how they may enjoy this place, knowing and loving its people, serve this place, caring for the lonely and poor and vulnerable within it, and prioritize relationships within this place with those who are near at home, work, school, worship, and play.

I think that's putting the principle of Jeremiah 29 into practice. So let me encourage you. If God has brought you to New Haven, settle down here and get involved in this community and find a solid church that you can really sink your...

[10 : 32] Sink your teeth into is the wrong metaphor. But, right? Like, enjoy. Like, embed yourself within the community. Don't, right? Don't just be sort of floating around from place to place and rooted nowhere.

Right? Enjoy this place. Enjoy New Haven. Serve New Haven and prioritize the people who God has put next to you, where you're living, where you're working, where you relax and play, and in church.

So it's right for us, and do that even if you only expect to be here for a short time, or even if you find some aspects of this place uncomfortable or alienating.

Right? It's right for us to be committed to the places that God puts us for a time. But, you know, however much God may call us to invest in particular places at particular times, the truth of Hebrews 11 is also true.

God's people are always called to be pilgrims on a journey. You see, none of the places that God calls us to inhabit for a time is our true home.

[11:37] For our entire earthly life, we are pilgrims on a journey toward our true home in the heavenly city of God. And so each time that we must physically move on from a place that we have known and loved for a long time, or each time that we must stay and say goodbye to a loved one who is moving on, we can remind ourselves that God's people are always called to be pilgrims.

And God himself is the only unshakable, unchangeable reality of our journey. And when we accept our status, our call to be pilgrims, we can know that promise of verse 16, therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.

Earlier in Hebrews it says Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters because he fully shared our humanity. He called us to belong to him. For many years I assumed that I would be here in New Haven and at Trinity indefinitely, perhaps until I would retire or die.

This place and this church have been my physical and spiritual home for literally half my earthly existence the last 20 years. And so at times it's been a painful process to let go of that assumption and to surrender some of my attachments.

But in that process God has drawn me to cling to himself in ways I never would have imagined. Over the last several months I've journaled once or twice a week, writing out my prayers and processing my thoughts and emotions.

[13:13] And as I read over my journal entries I'm struck by how many prayers God has answered. Now if you told me a year ago that I'd be preaching my last sermon at Trinity today, I probably would not have believed you.

But if you told me 20 years ago on the first Sunday of September when I walked into Trinity Baptist Church as a junior in college that I would still be here 20 years later, I definitely would not have believed you.

I guess I'm not very good at predicting how my life is going to unfold. But honestly, I don't know many people whose life has unfolded exactly the way they expected.

If your life's unfolded exactly how you expected, just wait a couple years. Along the way God sends us unwanted afflictions as well as unforeseen blessings.

And you know both of those things are reminders that God is God and we are not. And he's gracious to give us many good gifts and he's entirely within his rights to take any of them away at any time.

[14:18] But the invitation he extends to us in every transition, in every loss, in every change, in every new challenge, a new opportunity, is to cling to him and continue on the next phase of our pilgrimage toward the heavenly city.

You know, sometimes when we find ourselves in an uncomfortable place or in the midst of a difficult season or looking back on a very good season, we can be tempted to idealize some season of life that has already passed.

Right? We call it looking back on the good old days. Right? Nostalgia. And the Bible actually warns us that nostalgia can be a trap.

In other words, constantly wishing that we could go back to some other place or some other time. Ecclesiastes 7.10 says, Do not say, Why were the old days better than these?

For it is not wise to ask such questions. Ecclesiastes is fairly blunt. Once when I was about 12, I was riding my bike down the street near my house and I noticed something.

[15:25] I don't remember what it was, but I noticed something and turned my head for a few seconds and I rammed into a mailbox. Thankfully, I was wearing my helmet. And then I turned back to see how in the world I had hit that mailbox and I rammed into the next mailbox.

After the second mailbox, I learned my lesson. Watch where you're going. Right? And there's a spiritual truth here. Right? Our posture is to be like Abraham in verse 10, looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Yes, we can and should look back on God's faithfulness in the past and learn from our mistakes in the past and the hard seasons in the past. And yet, our gaze is not to be fixed on somewhere in the past.

Our gaze is to be looking ahead to what God has for us next and ultimately looking ahead to the glorious future He's promised in the eternal city of God. Right?

Verse 15 says, If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, a heavenly one. You know, the last prayer in the Bible is Revelation, the end of Revelation 22, and it's only three words.

[16:42] Come, Lord Jesus. You know, 20 years ago, I probably didn't pray that prayer very much, to be honest. Because I had a lot ahead of me.

Right? I was in college. Life was going well. And, you know, I would see that prayer in the Bible and say, yes, come, Lord Jesus. But also, there's a lot of other things I'm really looking forward to.

You know, the longer you go through life, I think God is training us to pray that prayer. Because the best things that we enjoy in this world only pale in comparison to what's to come.

And all the hard stuff and all the afflictions are meant to remind us that this world isn't our home. And so I think it takes a long time sometimes, but I think God is training us to be able to pray those last words of the Bible.

Come, Lord Jesus. With all our hearts. So that's the first truth we see. God's people are always pilgrims. We are always called to be pilgrims on a journey.

[17:48] The second truth I want to highlight is found in chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. So let me read these verses that come at the conclusion of sort of the men and women of faith of chapter 11.

It says, Now Hebrews chapter 11 is our long list of our spiritual mothers and fathers in the faith.

And verse 1 of chapter 12 calls these saints the great cloud of witnesses. They've finished their earthly journey. They're sort of like spectators in the stands, bearing witness to the faithfulness of God who's brought them all the way to the finish line.

And we can derive a lot of encouragement and wisdom from the stories of faithful saints who've gone before us. Both those we've known personally, as well as those who we only have read or heard about from others or from reading books or from the Bible.

But you know, the conclusion of this great chapter of men and women of faith, it doesn't say, fix your eyes on those faithful saints who've gone before us.

[19:25] No, it says, look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith. That word founder can also be translated author, pioneer, champion, or even trailblazer.

You see, the path that God calls us to walk with all its unexpected twists and turns has been blazed by none other than Jesus Christ himself. You know, if you're traveling through unfamiliar territory, it's important to know who has gone before you.

Who has laid down this road and who is committed to maintaining it? You know, when we were traveling through South Dakota this summer, we went on a lot of dirt roads. There are actually three kinds of dirt roads.

So there are maintained dirt roads. And the speed limit is normally 55 on those. You sort of realize, no, you shouldn't go to the speed limit. But there are maintained ones.

And then there are others that say minimal maintenance, travel at your own risk. And then there are others that are usually just like a track that ends in a cornfield that says, no maintenance, travel not recommended.

[20:34] One of the places we stayed this summer was down eight miles of dirt roads in western South Dakota near the Badlands. And about halfway down those dirt roads when all we could see was cows and grasslands and barbed wire fences, Jane turned to me and said something like, how exactly did you choose this place?

Now, okay, I planned the trip, but every place, I emailed her, showed her at one point, right? She said, how exactly did you choose it? I said, well, it had lots of good reviews online. And she said, I think this might be a bit too far off the beaten track.

And I said, well, I'm just following the directions they gave us. Thankfully, we made it without incident. We didn't see any strange wildlife along that road.

But you know, when you're in unfamiliar territory, it matters whose road you're traveling on and it matters whose directions you're following. Many of the commands in the Bible are not easy for us, for people like us to follow.

We sang that song, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. We're prone to turn off the road and find ourself in a ditch. Sometimes God calls us to walk a road that seems hard, a road of sacrifice and suffering in obedience to him.

[21:56] But Hebrews says, let us run with endurance the race marked out for us. In other words, let's continue on the path that God has laid out for us obeying his word because Jesus has walked that path.

Every step of that path, Jesus has walked before us. He endured the cross for the joy set before him, the joy of bringing us with him to glory. See, the message of the Bible is that Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

He has lived a life of complete faith and obedience to God. All right, if you read the stories of Jesus' life in the gospel, the way he treats other people with love and honor, the way he endured suffering and hardship, look at him.

I remember when I was, I don't know, maybe about 10, maybe even less, a little younger than that, and I was listening to the pastor of the church I grew up in, just preach about the character of Jesus and his compassion and his humility and his love, and it just, I realized I was proud.

I was arrogant. I wasn't like Jesus in so many ways. You know, I'd grown up in the church, I'd heard it, but I remember it really struck me just looking at the character of Jesus, how much I did not live up to that.

[23:17] But the message of the Bible is God has done for us in Jesus what we could not do for ourselves. We could not cleanse us from ourselves from our sins. We could not make a way for ourselves to come before God, but Jesus has.

He's paid the price for our sins in his death on the cross. And in his resurrection, he's triumphed over death and made a way for us to come into God's presence. So that's the invitation.

If you're new to Christianity, if you're just exploring, visiting, or here with a friend, that's what Jesus, that's what Christianity is all about. It's not proving ourself or a list of things that we have to do or not do.

It's about the person of Jesus. So I encourage you, look at who Jesus is and consider him. These words say he's the author and the finisher, the founder and the perfecter.

And that word perfecter means someone who brings something to its appointed goal, or end. Right? Jesus is not only the one who begins our journey of faith, he's the one who has promised to accompany us all the way to the end of our earthly pilgrimage.

[24:25] So don't let anything distract you from fixing your eyes on Jesus and looking to him. You know, one of the books that has shaped my understanding of being a pastor and that I've returned to over the years is called The Art of Pastoring.

It was written by David Hanson out of his experience as a pastor in rural Montana for many years. And the main idea that he develops in his book is that a pastor is called to be a parable of Jesus.

And to some extent he would say this is the calling of every Christian, but his book particularly focuses on what that looks like for pastors. Here's a little of what he says. He says, a parable is a story, right?

Jesus told many parables, a story about something known that sheds light on something unknown. So its purpose is not to tell people what they already know, but to bring something new, unforeseen, and surprising to the hearer.

So he says, as a pastor, I'm a known quantity. People see me, they know me, they hear me, I listen to them, but by God's grace when I do these things, people don't just encounter me, they encounter the one who I represent.

[25:31] People encounter Christ. But then he asks this question, he says, how can my oft-broken life reflect and convey the living, intimate Lord of the universe into everyday lives of my oft-broken people?

Am I Jesus? No. So then he uses an analogy from fishing, because he spends a lot of time fishing. He says, I'm just a hook with some feathers and threads on it.

As I follow Jesus throughout my day, I fish for people for God. Ultimately, what I am is the bait. Pastors bring Christ to people and then quickly become unimportant, unnecessary to the important thing, the parishioner's relationship with Jesus.

So he says, pastors who make people habitually dependent on them can fall into many traps. But pastors who walk with Jesus and whose lives reflect Jesus and who attract people so that they get hooked by Jesus are doing exactly what God made them to do.

So if God has used my words or my presence or my prayers to help you connect with Jesus, then I praise him. Because that's an amazing privilege.

[26:47] It's a glorious mystery to be used by God in that way. But as I leave, my greatest hope is that your connection to Jesus would grow even deeper in this next season.

That you would look to him as the author and the perfecter of your faith. The one who has drawn you to himself through whoever he may have used.

The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4 and 9, whatever you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things and the God of peace will be with you. So if there's anything true or helpful or godly or wise that you have seen in me or learned from me or my wife Jane, my encouragement is put it into practice.

Pass it on. Share it with somebody else. So from chapter 11 we see that God's people are always pilgrims. From chapter 12 we see that Jesus has gone before us on our journey and finally in chapter 13 at the end we see that God equips everyone whom he has called to follow Jesus.

Go to 13, chapter 13, verse 20. I want to finish with these last two verses, 20 and 21. Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, 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.

[28:23] Amen. You know, almost every New Testament letter ends with a word of blessing and this was not a common practice in other ancient letters. Most ancient letters just ended with farewell, short and sweet.

But Christian letters very frequently ended with a word of blessing. Sometimes it was short, grace be with you. Right here, it's a little longer. But it's the writer entrusting his brothers and sisters in Christ into God's faithful and merciful hands.

Look for a moment at this blessing. Verse 20 looks back on what God the Father did for Jesus. Namely, he raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Our great shepherd who laid down his life for us has been raised never to die again.

And then verse 21 looks forward to what he promises to do for us. He will equip us with everything good so that we may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight.

So you see, the logic of this blessing is if God raised Jesus, our great shepherd from the dead, then he is more than able to equip us, Jesus' sheep, with everything we need to accomplish his will.

[29:34] So this prayer is not just a wish. The writer of Hebrews is not just saying, bye, hope it all goes well for you. No, it's a strong word of affirmation from the God who loves us deeply and who is sufficient for our every need.

May this God, the God of peace, the God of glory, the God who raised Jesus from the dead, equip you with everything good that you may do the Lord's will.

And you might ask, what is God's will? Well, very simply, it's to endure in faith, hope, and love. If you look at the last three chapters of Hebrews, we could do this.

Chapter 11's about faith, chapter 12's about hope, chapter 13's about love. So if you want to know what God's will for us is, start with those three things. Right?

And this blessing is that God would equip us with everything we need to hold on to faith, to hold fast to hope, and to endure in loving one another as he has loved us.

[30:40] This is my prayer for you as a church. It's my prayer for the pastors and the elders, for the deacons and the staff, for the members and the attenders of the church, that God would equip you for all the challenges and all the opportunities that are now before you, and all the ones that will come your way in the future, the ones you might expect and the ones you cannot foresee.

And that you would know Jesus ever more deeply as your great and good shepherd, that you would live deeply into your union with him and see him continuing to work out what is pleasing in his sight.

Over the past few weeks, I've reflected on some of the work that I've seen God do in many of you over the years. It's been so encouraging to do that. You know, sometimes we don't do that very well.

We don't sort of step back and look at not just the last week or the last few days, but, you know, the last year or five years or ten years or twenty years. And it's been so encouraging to think about some of the things that, some of the ways God has been faithful to so many of you who I have come to know and spend time with.

And just seeing God's sustaining people through affliction and bringing people to faith in him and sustaining their faith through trials and growing them in different ways, it's a wonderful thing to look back on.

[31 : 55] Also, God has been faithful and merciful to us as a family in so many ways through you. It's been an honor to have been one of your pastors.

God has used many of you in my life and my family's life over the years. Your prayers have not been in vain. Your words of encouragement have been heard.

Your admonitions and hard questions have been appreciated. Your hospitality and friendship has been a blessing. Your thoughtful input and feedback have helped to shape who I am and who we are.

We wouldn't be who we are today without you and we wouldn't be ready to take this next step apart from what we've learned here. So I thank God for how he has worked through you to do what these verses say, to equip us with everything good for carrying out his will and we pray and trust that he would continue to do so in this next step of our journey.

The last word I want to leave you with is just a couple of reflections on Psalm 23. Right? This benediction talks about Jesus as the great shepherd of the sheep and it's that shepherd that Psalm 23 talks about.

[33 : 10] Psalm 23 begins by talking about how Jesus leads us. The good shepherd leads us into green pastures. He goes ahead of us. And then in the middle it says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear for you are with me.

Jesus walks beside us. And then the last verse, verse 6, says, surely goodness and steadfast love will follow me. Did you hear that word? That word follow me can mean to chase you down, to actively pursue.

Right? Jesus goes before us, Jesus walks with us and Jesus even comes behind us to protect us. Right? When you're walking through an unfamiliar place you worry about what you can't see as well as about what you can see.

And the Bible says Jesus is all of those things. He goes before us, He walks beside us and His love and mercy will follow us all the days of our life until we return to dwell in His house forever.

So as we continue on our pilgrimage, let's do so looking to Jesus. I want to close with a prayer that someone else has written but that I thought would be appropriate for today.

[34 : 30] It's a prayer for leaving and continuing on our journey with Christ. So let us pray together. Friends and saints and fellow pilgrims, we part now in the confidence that in our diverging paths we walk the same road fanning the same flame and that in time we will meet again in a fellowship forever unbroken.

By your spirit, O Christ, make us faithful in the meanwhile as we go out to labor in the diverse fields to which you have assigned us, laboring unto that better meeting and unto that new made world that is yet promised and that has already begun.

O Spirit of God, be as present in our parting as you were in our gathering. Be present in our journeys, be present in our days to come, be present in our works and in our words and in our hearts.

Be present in the bonds of our community, Lord Christ. Be ever at work among us and through us. Amen.