

# Hebrews 13:20-25

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[ 0 : 00 ] in Christ. Verse 23, he shares some news about a mutual friend, about Timothy, who was known to them on a first-name basis, who had been released presumably from prison.

He then expresses his desire and his plan to visit them in person. And in verse 24, he conveys greetings to and from the wider community that they are connected with.

His tone is not official and formulaic, it is personal and earnest. These are the kind of things that you would write to a close friend or family member. And these verses remind us that the letter to the Hebrews is not only a profound theological argument, it's not only an inspiring retelling of the stories of faithful men and women of the past. As he says in verse 22, it's a word of exhortation. In other words, it's a personal message of assurance and admonition, a word of comfort and a word of warning, a word intended to strengthen his readers and us to persevere amidst trying and uncertain times. As we've seen over the past year, the book of Hebrews was written to a group of Christians who were facing both external pressures and internal doubts.

They were socially marginalized. Many of their neighbors considered them rather strange for worshiping a man who had been crucified, executed. They were economically disadvantaged. Some of them had had their property taken away. They were facing a looming threat of physical persecution from the local authorities. They were facing all kinds of stressful situations with no apparent coming resolution. They were beset by external pressures, but they were also facing internal doubts.

They were starting to say to themselves and perhaps to one another, if as believers in Jesus, we are God's children, destined for glory and honor, why is our life now so full of suffering and shame? Does Christianity really make sense when the surrounding culture seems indifferent at best and hostile at worst? And their internal doubts had led at least some of them to draw back, to distance themselves from one another and from the Christian community, to stop identifying publicly as a follower of Jesus. The Christian community, which had once been cohesive and hopeful, was now discouraged and fragmenting. That's the situation that this book was written into.

[ 2 : 48 ] And the book of Hebrews is a grand exhortation not to grow weary and lose heart, but instead to run the race with endurance by looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith. More than any other theme, the book of Hebrews focuses on the surpassing glory and the absolute sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Most of the first ten chapters are focused directly on this theme.

And since this is our last sermon, I thought it would be worth doing a bit of a recap. If you're new, consider this a review of our last year, all in ten minutes. You can flip through the chapters as I summarize them briefly. Chapter one focuses on the superiority of the Son of God, who is exalted high above all the angels and the heavenly hosts. Chapter two tells us that this glorious Son of God, through whom the whole universe was created, humbled himself to become our brother, namely Jesus.

Jesus shared in our humanity, in our flesh and blood, all the way to the point of dying our death on the cross, in order to destroy the devil and deliver us from the enslaving fear of death.

In chapter three, we see not only what Jesus saves us from, but what he saves us for. He is the faithful builder of God's house, even greater than Moses. And it says we are his house if we hold on to our confidence and our hope in him. And chapter four shows us that Jesus is the one even greater than Joshua, who gives us access to the true promised land, to the ultimate place of rest and joy. But of course, we're not yet in the promised land. In the meantime, we walk through the wilderness in our life on earth. And we see in chapter four and five that as we walk through the wilderness, Jesus is our great high priest, who goes ahead of us, and yet who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Because he, like us, was tempted in every way, and yet without sin. And therefore, we can draw near to him to find mercy and grace in our time of need. Chapter six shows us that Jesus is the sure and steadfast anchor for our soul, the guarantee of God's unswerving faithfulness to his promise. Chapter seven and eight remind us that Jesus' role is not a temporary one. It's not subject to change in the future.

There's no one else who's coming after him to supersede him. He is the eternal king of righteousness and peace. He is the priest who continues forever by the power of his indestructible life.

[ 5 : 50 ] And because Jesus is the priest who continues forever, chapter eight shows us that he's the mediator of a new and better covenant. In other words, through him, we are brought into an unbreakable bond, a lasting and intimate relationship with God himself. Chapters nine and ten, focus on the sufficiency and completeness of Jesus' work. His once for all sacrifice on the cross that has decisively dealt with sin. And Jesus' perfect obedience to God's will that decisively sets us apart. Because of his sacrifice, because of his obedience, we see that the way into God's presence is now open. Our sins are forgiven and our conscience is made clean. More than anything else, the author of Hebrews throughout his book has been saying, look at this glorious Jesus. Look at his surpassingly glorious person. Look at his absolutely sufficient work. See how even the greatest prophets and the most faithful priests and the most powerful kings in the past fade into the shadows in the light of Jesus.

So several times Hebrews issues some strong warnings. He says, don't drift away. Don't neglect such a great salvation. Don't become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Don't become complacent and apathetic.

Don't risk losing it all and being consumed in the blazing fire of God's judgment by never fully entering in to life with Christ. Hebrews gives some of the most severe warnings in the whole New Testament, but it also issues some of the most gracious invitations. Chapter 10, verses 19 through 25 says, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way that he opened for us through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith.

And then he says, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And finally, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.

You see, in light of the greatness and the sufficiency of Jesus, Hebrews calls us to a life of faith, hope, and love. Chapter 11 calls us to live by faith in God's promises as we follow the examples of many who have gone before. Chapter 12 calls us to live and persevere in hope, to endure painful suffering in the present as we look forward to the kingdom of God that cannot be shaken.

[ 8 : 51 ] And finally, chapter 13 spurs us on toward love. Concrete, costly, Christ-like demonstrations of love for other people. There's a book of Hebrews in a nutshell. The surpassing glory and absolute insufficiency of Jesus, calling us into a life of faith, hope, and love. In verse 22, the author urges us.

He says, bear with my word of exhortation. In other words, he's saying, I know you might be tempted to resist or ignore some of the strong warnings or pass by some of the more complex sections of argument, but he says, I want you to know I've written to you briefly. Now, you might think that's a joke.

If you've been here for the last year, taking us a whole year to preach through this book, and you think, brief? Hebrews? But actually, I think the author was serious. There was an ancient Roman professor of rhetoric who was writing right around the same time as Hebrews was written, quintillion. And he says, to be brief consists not in saying less, but in not saying more than is necessary at the time. In other words, he's saying, I may not have answered all your questions.

I haven't gone into all the detail that I could have on every matter. There is much more that could have been said, but I've given you what you need to know for now. So I appeal to you.

Take what I have said to heart. But then we see the author doesn't simply end with an appeal or an exhortation or even a warning to his readers. He ends his letter with a prayer addressed to God.

[ 10 : 42 ] Verse 20 and 21, he concludes with a prayer of blessing, what we call a benediction, a good word, entrusting his brothers and sisters in Christ into the faithful hands of God.

Now, it's interesting that many other aspects of the closing of this letter are commonly found in other ancient letters. Greetings from friends, news about mutual acquaintances, plans for future visits. All of those are common parts of ancient and modern letters between friends. But the benediction is a uniquely biblical genre. It's a uniquely biblical aspect of a closing to a letter.

You can read other letters from the ancient Greco-Roman world. They don't have it. But you read almost every letter in the New Testament and it ends with a benediction, a good word, a prayer entrusting the recipients of the letter into the faithful hands of God.

So for the rest of the time, I want to focus in on these verses, verse 20 and 21. Now, the prayer in verses 20 and 21 has two parts. The first part looks back. The second part looks forward. Verse 20 is a declaration of what God has accomplished for and in Jesus.

Verse 21 is a prayer that God would do for us what he has promised through Jesus. And there's a parallel structure to the prayer that makes this very clear. If you look in your bulletin on the fifth page, I've printed out the structure of the verse for you. The prayer begins by calling on the God of peace and it ends by ascribing glory to this God forever and ever. But in the middle, there are two parallel sections. Now, for the sake of clarity in reading, most English translations have rearranged the order of the phrases in verse 20. So the ESV says, may the God of peace who brought again from the dead, our Lord Jesus. That's a fine translation because it makes clear who God brought again from the dead.

[ 12 : 54 ] But in the original language, the phrase, our Lord Jesus, actually comes at the end of that verse. So I've printed it here, preserving the original order of the phrases.

So may the God of peace who brought again from the dead, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. The point is, the two verses are parallel and they both end deliberately and climactically with Jesus.

Jesus. That's the last word that he wants to say to them. It's been his first word and his last word, through Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of what God has accomplished in the past, and Jesus is the one who gives them confidence for what God will do in the future.

So verse 20 focuses on what God has accomplished in the past in Jesus. In particular, it focuses on God bringing Jesus out of death. Now the author of Hebrews could have spoken of many aspects of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. He could have spoken about Jesus' birth, or his childhood, or his baptism, or his teaching of the scriptures, or his healing of the sick, or his casting out demons, or feeding the multitudes. And every one of Jesus' acts were signs of the kingdom of God that had arrived in him. But the greatest sign, the climax of all four of the gospels, the climactic sign that the kingdom of God had arrived in Jesus, was that God brought Jesus out from the dead. God placed his stamp of approval on Jesus, on every one of his words and deeds, by bringing Jesus out of death, and by exalting him to the highest place of authority, at the right hand of God. So that's what Hebrews goes to. He goes right to the heart of the Christian faith. You know, if you're considering the Christian faith, or if you're questioning the Christian faith, the heart, the focal point of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

It's the linchpin that holds Christianity together, and apart from it, Christianity falls apart. When I was in college, I had grown up as a Christian, but I was plagued by doubts during my sophomore and junior years. There were all kinds of theological and philosophical questions that I just couldn't seem to get my head around. Some of them I still can't get my head around, quite.

[ 15 : 42 ] They swirled around in my mind and left me feeling weary, isolated, and unsure. But one thing I realized is that despite all my doubts and questions, I had found no reason to disbelieve that Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate and bodily resurrected on the third day.

Now, I was a history major, so this was not for lack of looking into alternative views. I studied the historical background. I read books by scholars who affirmed the bodily resurrection and those who denied or questioned it. I took a seminar on the historical Jesus with a very confident professor who rejected the resurrection of Jesus. But the more I looked into it, the more convinced I became that the resurrection of Jesus had really happened just as the earliest Christians testified at the cost of their lives that it had. And that became for me the rock that I held onto, the anchor point that I could rely on, the central reality around which everything else could be seen in its light. And over time, some of the questions gradually seem to make more sense in light of the resurrection of Jesus. And Hebrews tells us that the one whom God brought again from the dead is the great shepherd of the sheep, Jesus. He's the one who continues to lead and guide us.

Last week, Pastor Matt talked about leaders in the church and how God appoints spiritual leaders to watch over our souls, verse 17, as a shepherd watches over his flock. And this verse points us to Jesus as the great shepherd, the ultimate leader who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's the great shepherd who has all authority and all power and all majesty and all dominion forever and ever. But he's also the good shepherd who feeds and cares for us, who seeks out the lost and brings back the strays and binds up the brokenhearted and strengthens the weak. This verse reminds us that he's the good shepherd who laid down his life for us, his sheep. And in his blood, he established an eternal covenant, an unbreakable bond between us and God for all who turn to Jesus in faith. And Jesus continues to be our great shepherd who leads us on all the way to glory. Hebrews says this is what God has already accomplished for us in Jesus.

God has raised Jesus from the dead. He is the great shepherd of the sheep who has secured our relationship with God. And on that basis, verse 21 is a prayer, a confident prayer for us as we look into the future.

He prays, may this same God equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ. Now, this is a prayer that expresses our complete dependence on God. The only way that you and I can accomplish God's will is if God equips us with everything good. The only way for us to truly please God is for God to work in us. This isn't something we can accomplish by ourselves.

[ 19 : 27 ] You know, if all we needed was instruction to engage our minds and exhortation to challenge our wills, the last three chapters of Hebrews should have been enough. Chapters 11 through 13 have been full of practical instruction and exhortation to live by faith, to persevere in hope, to stir up one another in love. But you know, we don't just have a mind to understand and a will to make decisions.

We have a heart. In other words, we have affections and desires. And only God can truly transform the human heart.

Brothers and sisters, that's why we need to pray. Every week in staff meeting, we pray for our Sunday gatherings, that God would come and send his Holy Spirit among us and take the words that we sing and read from the Bible and that are spoken and seal them to our hearts and make them to grow and bear fruit in our lives. Very often as I'm preparing a sermon during the week, I come to the point, I come to a point where I nearly despair. It's happened so often that it doesn't bother me quite as often as it used to. But it feels like this sermon is just not coming together.

It's going nowhere. It feels like I'm walking through a very sticky swamp. But it always drives me to pray. To pray for clarity, to pray for insight, to pray for the anointing of the Holy Spirit for which there is no substitute. Maybe you're facing external pressures or internal doubts or that seem completely overwhelming. Maybe you feel like as you look to the week ahead that you're walking through a swamp that is only getting deeper.

And you're already up to your waist. And you think, how far, how much farther can I go? Maybe you have so many people asking you for help that you feel like you're going to have a breakdown.

[ 21 : 38 ] Maybe you have family conflict that seems to never be resolved in a healthy way. And you think, how can I stay in these relationships and participate in them in a healthy way?

How can I not be totally discouraged and overwhelmed by them? Maybe you're mourning the loss of a loved one who can never be replaced. And every day you think of them and you wonder, how will I continue without them? Maybe you're working hard at your job or in your studies and your supervisor or your professor is still saying, not good enough. Brothers and sisters, we need to pray.

We need to pray in dependence on God, but at the same time, through Jesus Christ, we can pray with complete confidence in God. The tone of this prayer is not a desperate cry for help.

It's a confident expression of trust. That the very same God who brought Jesus back from the dead can and will equip us with everything good so that you and I can accomplish his will.

I mean, think about it. Which is harder? To raise a dead person to indestructible bodily life or to give you what you need today to live and please God. Now you might say both are equally impossible.

[ 23 : 06 ] If you're having a bad day or if you have a good spiritual perception of yourself. But that is the point. We serve a God who has done the impossible.

He has brought again from the dead, Jesus our Lord. And we belong to Jesus as his brothers and sisters through the eternal covenant in his blood.

And God has promised never to leave us, never to forsake us, but to equip us with everything good that we may do his will. That word equip could also be translated to fashion us, to shape us as a potter shapes the clay, or to prepare us, to fit us with what we need to do God's will.

So whatever the external pressures that beset you, whatever the internal doubts that plague you, whatever the uncertainties that you see as you contemplate the future, make this your prayer.

That the God who raised Jesus from the dead would equip you with everything good, that you may do his will, that he would work in and among us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

[ 24 : 34 ] Let us pray. God, we thank you for this last word.

Lord, we thank you that this author has left us with a prayer, a confident prayer, that you will do, that you will complete what you have begun in Jesus Christ.

You will complete what you have begun in us. You are united to him. Lord, we pray that in the midst of whatever we may be facing, that you would be the rock of our salvation, that we cling on to, that in your light we may see the world more clearly.

Lord, make it our focus to do your will, to live to please you. And equip us, we pray, with everything good.

Work in us. That it may be accomplished by your grace. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 26 : 02 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.