

Hebrews 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 13. Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you, so we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper, I will not fear. What can man do to me? Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods which have not benefited those devoted to them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat, for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp, and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this, in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. 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 for ever and ever. Amen.

I appeal to you brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.

[2 : 51] Grace be with all of you. In Hebrews 13, the final chapter of the book, there are concluding exhortations, and the author sums up the message of the book. It begins with four pairs of exhortations, with reasons attached to the first, third and fourth. The first pair is, let brotherly love continue, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, and the reason attached, for thereby some have entertained angels and awares. The second, remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, followed by the other part of the pair, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body. The third pair, let marriage be held in honour among all, and the second part of that pair, and let the marriage bed be undefiled. The attached reason, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. The final pair is, keep your life free from love of money.

The second part being, and be content with what you have, with the reason attached, for he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. These exhortations largely expand the opening exhortation, let brotherly love continue. He is exhorting them to continue in behaviours of brotherly love, and to refrain from behaviours against brotherly love. It's interesting to consider that these are the fitting responses to the message of the book. Much of it gives attention to the life of the community of the people of God. We are members of the same household. If we have the same father, we should treat each other as brothers and sisters. This is not just about individual ethics.

Continued love towards brothers must be accompanied by love towards strangers, in the form of hospitality. The author of Hebrews plays upon the word love for brothers, with the word that he uses for love for strangers. It could be very easy to love the brothers, and do so in a way that ignores strangers. He observes that some of those who have exercised such hospitality towards strangers have entertained angels unawares. This might naturally be seen as a reference to Genesis chapter 18 and 19, as the angels that go to inspect Sodom are entertained first by Abraham and then later by Lot. We might also think of Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus speaks of a sort of test of hospitality, as persons later described as his brethren are ministered to and served by various others. And on the basis of their welcome of his brothers, they are blessed.

Christ identifies with his brothers. He comes incognito in the poor, the person who needs a drink, the person who needs to be visited in prison. The love that should be shown to people of the household of faith, needs to overflow to those outside. And Christ, coming incognito in his servants, presents a sort of judgment that comes unawares upon a people. Sodom, like the villages and towns of Israel later in the story of Christ, is tested with a secret test. They do not know the time of their visitation, and yet they are judged according to their treatment of those who came to them when they were unawares. They are called to associate with those in prison or being tortured, particularly those who are suffering for their faith. Marriage is to be held in a special honour. This is a more general cultural and social commitment to the institution of marriage. It's not just for the married, but for everyone. Marriage is particularly important to uphold. It requires an honouring of the commitment to marriage, a restriction of sexual relations to the marriage bed, the ordinary expectation that people will get married. While there is no sin per se in not getting married, and the marriage should not be seen as above the unmarried, there is a special honour in the institution of marriage, and that meaning of marriage must be guarded and protected and celebrated. It is not just to be a private commitment for married persons. It is not just about affirming the married as individuals.

It is about a social value that all of us must maintain. And the positive exhortation here is followed by a negative counterpart. The marriage bed should not be defiled. In employing the language of defilement, the marriage bed is being implicitly presented as if it were holy. This holiness must be maintained by the marriage partners and also by everyone else around them. The author of Hebrews particularly focuses here upon the judgment on the sexually immoral. Just as there was a positive exhortation followed by a negative exhortation in the commandment concerning marriage, now there is a negative exhortation followed by a positive counterpart concerning greed. Greed is extremely dangerous and contentment is necessary. If the reason given for avoiding defiling the marriage bed was God's judgment upon adulterers and the sexually immoral, here the reason given for contentment is God's blessing of his continued presence. There is probably an allusion here to statements given by Moses to Joshua in Deuteronomy chapter 31 verse 8 and it's followed by a quotation from Psalm 118 verse 6. The fact that the New Testament so often and so consistently focuses upon these two particular sins, upon sexual immorality and greed, probably has a lot to say to our particular age. Verses 7 and 17 contain exhortations about leaders. They must learn from past leaders and learn from present leaders. The author here also sums up the key thrust of the book to persevere.

[8 : 14] It really is important to have examples to look to and people with whom to associate. A very great deal of this book is devoted to the presentation of positive and negative examples. The negative examples of the wilderness generation and characters like Esau and the positive examples of the heroes of the faith and most particularly Christ himself. Now the founding leaders of the community are presented as further examples.

They must pay attention to the outcome of their faith, to the fruit that they bore and to the impact that they made upon their community. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. He is the eternal son. He is faithful in all times and in all generations. He does not change. He is the same one to whom people looked in times past and the same one that people will look to in the future. He is a fitting guarantee of all of God's promises and the definitive and enduring word of God. This message about the eternity of Christ has been throughout the book of Hebrews. There is, however, the danger of novel teaching leading people astray from Christ. The alternative to being led away is for the heart to be strengthened. Foods like the rituals of the tabernacle were utterly powerless to deal with the core issue of the heart. We have an altar, a table to participate in, perhaps something symbolized by the Eucharist.

Ongoing participation in the once for all sacrifice of Christ is necessary. We should contrast this with those who remain in the way of the old covenant after Christ has come. There is a danger of giving up the riches received in Christ by continuing to go back to something that has no life in it, no future in it.

The sin offering, which was most particularly associated with the Day of Atonement, the day that anticipated the eschatological passage into the New Age, had more specific regulations for its sacrifices.

The bodies of the animals had to be disposed of very carefully after their blood had been used, Leviticus chapter 16 verse 27. And the bull for the sin offering, and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be carried outside the camp.

[10 : 29] Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire. The animals whose blood accomplished the movement from the first section to the inner section of the tent were burnt outside of the camp. Christ also suffered outside of the gate according to this same pattern. It's the place of rejection, of exclusion, and of shame. And there is no meal for that particular sin offering.

In chapter 10 of Leviticus, the priests ate the sin offerings of the people. In some respect, they bore the sin of Israel in doing this. Leviticus chapter 10 verses 16 to 18.

Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up. And he was angry with Eliezer and Ithema, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary? Since it is a thing most holy, and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord. Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary.

You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded. That sacrifice involved going outside of the camp to burn up the animal in a clean place. In Leviticus chapter 6 verse 30, Sin offerings whose blood was brought into the holy places had their flesh prohibited for eating.

The fact that we can eat the sin offering of Christ, that we can eat the sacrifice on that particular altar, suggests that we have a far holier status than we ever did before, a far holier status than the priests even did in the old covenant. They could eat some of the sacrifices for the sin offering that were offered by the people, but they could not eat any of the sin offerings whose blood was brought into the holy places. However, in Christ we can. This suggests that we have a far higher status. There is a new form of sacrificial worship. It involves a sacrifice of praise, with the fruit of lips offered up to the Lord. Animal and vegetable sacrifices symbolise continuing human sacrifices, the ways that we offer our bodies and our lives and our lips.

[12 : 33] The sacrificial service of good deeds and charity is also mentioned here. The person who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. It is a form of sacrificial worship that God truly desires.

In verse 17, he speaks of the importance of obeying and submitting to leaders. They keep watch over our souls and they must give an account to God, and it is important to give them joy by being responsive for their service. The mutual benefit of good leaders and responsive people under their leadership must be recognised. Leadership is a collaborative task. We must be those who are able to be led, and we must be those who have good leaders over us.

Although the book has more of the character of a sermon, it ends in a similar manner to other letters. There is a request for prayer, there is a blessing, exhortation, travel plans, and final greetings.

In verse 20, we might hear an allusion to Isaiah chapter 63, verses 11 to 14. Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest.

So you led your people to make for yourself a glorious name. In this allusion, once again, he sets up Jesus and Moses alongside each other. Jesus is the one who brought up his people from the dead through his resurrection.

[14 : 14] He is the new shepherd of the sheep. If Moses was like a shepherd of the sheep, he is the one who led the flock to Mount Sinai in the first occasion, and then later the flock of Israel to Mount Sinai. And now, much as Moses led the flock of Israel through the wilderness, opening up the passage of the seas so that they could travel through and bringing them to Mount Sinai, Christ has brought us to a better mountain. Christ has torn open the abyss of death so that we might walk through on dry ground. We must have the courage of faith to go out to him, being prepared to face the rejection and exclusion that we'll suffer as we're associated with Christ, and bearing his reproach to look towards a better country, to be those who despise the shame because of the glory that is set before us. We don't know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but the reference to Timothy suggests that it may have been, if not Paul, someone of his party.

A question to consider, what might the author of Hebrews mean by the expression, by the blood of the eternal covenant?