

**A Hebrews Blessing**  
**Hebrews 13:20–25**  
**August 4, 2024**

Though next week we'll do a flyover review, today's passage is the final text in our yearlong study through the book of Hebrews. When we began the book, we noted how the structure of the book does not develop in a straight line from A to Z. Instead, the author switches back and forth between two primary aims. First, there's *exposition*, where the author details how Christ is better. Then, secondly, there's *exhortation*—encouraging those hearing that exposition to live as if it is actually true.<sup>1</sup> There's exposition; and there's exhortation. We said it'd be like that a year ago. The book has certainly been like that.

But at the end of the book, we might see this flipping back and forth from a different angle. The exhortations, the warnings—if we see them *rightly*—tell us to do things we cannot do, at least on our own. To just choose one exhortation, **let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us** (Heb. 12:1). Sure, author of Hebrews, I'll put that on my to-do list for Tuesday.

Yet, from this different angle on the flipping back and forth, while the exhortations certainly tell us to do things we cannot do on our own, the exposition about Christ tells us why we most certainly will. You *can't* do it. But you *will*. Or in the language of Hebrews 10, you have need of endurance. You will endure (Heb. 10:36–39).

And our text today, the final text, makes plain *why* we will. Not unlike Isaac blessing his sons with his final words, and Jacob doing the same with the sons of Joseph (Heb. 11:20–21), the author of Hebrews ends his words to these Jewish Christians with a prayer of blessing. We'll get to that in our final point, but note first:

1. **The Setting of the Sermon–Letter** (vv. 23–24)

When we began this book, I spent some time thinking about who the author was. It's a pretty common question for someone to research before they begin Hebrews. But then for 40 to 50 weeks, I rarely—if ever—thought about the question. Whoever the author was, he did not insert himself into the exposition. Frankly, for passage after passage, it didn't much *matter* who wrote the letter. What mattered was rightly understanding the better tabernacle, the better priesthood, or the better covenant.

But then toward the tail end of last week's text, the author wrote this, **Pray for us** (v. 18). Suddenly the book *wasn't* so impersonal. That throne of grace he's discussed at length, he's now asking those reading to approach on *his* behalf. And then he writes *this* in verse 19: **And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.**

In those verses, and in our text today, the letter—the sermon–letter—turns personal. Whoever it is, this is a real person writing. He's writing real people. And those real people are living in a particular moment. Verses 23 and 24 give us more details concerning the setting. Verse 23: **Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you.** Maybe your initial question regards whether this is the Timothy that Paul wrote. The answer is almost certainly “yes.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 27–28.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 429; Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 720. This means, that whoever the author of Hebrews is, he's within the Pauline network.

And if we wonder just how intense the suffering these believers faced was, we find out here that Timothy has been imprisoned for some time. Just a few verses prior, the author admonished these believers to **remember the prisoners** (13:3). These readers *didn't* hear that command the way we might, scratching our heads to recall the name of someone we know imprisoned for their faith. Instead, individuals they knew *well* had been in chains because they confessed Christ.

In the Lord's mercy, it seems, the author is glad to report that Timothy had been released from that prison. He tells this group of believers that if Timothy comes to him soon, they will visit the readers together.<sup>3</sup> As we noted last week, the author of Hebrews isn't barking commands from an ivory tower. He has affection for the people he's writing. He's not dispassionate about their endurance. And in a world where travel was not simple, he's coming to see them. That's why he asked they pray, **so that (he) may be restored to (them) the sooner** (13:19).

For whatever reason, at this point he's unable to get there. So, he tells them in verse 24 to **greet all of your leaders**. He's just spoken *of* those leaders. He knew them. Maybe he'd been one of them, serving alongside. So, it makes sense for him to pass along greetings. He goes on to ask them to greet, not only the leaders, but, v. 24, **all the saints**. This very well might mean they were to greet other house churches in their city.<sup>4</sup>

And it's possible the city they were in was Rome. That's why verse 24 ends, **Those from Italy greet you**. Is this like my situation last week, greeting you all from a church gathered in Italy? Not necessarily. Many believe the author of Hebrews is actually writing this letter to Jewish Christians gathering in Rome. And at this point, while he's away from them, he's met other believers *from* Italy, "displaced" Italians. So naturally, if he's sending a letter *to* Rome, those scattered Italians will take the opportunity to say *ciao*.

Why point all that out? Timothy, release from prison, an upcoming visit, the leaders, greeting saints, those from Italy? Because this letter has a setting. And that actually has relevance for how we read it. In fact, it has relevance concerning what we believe the letter is—and what it intends to accomplish.

## 2. The Sermon–Letter (v. 22)

Verse 22: **But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly**. First, the author says he's written to them briefly. Maybe you say, "It doesn't seem that brief." However, you can listen to the entire book on the ESV app in roughly 50 minutes. You could read it faster than that. I'd encourage you to do one of those before we review the whole thing next week.

That's the end of the verse. But the middle of this verse is one of the primary reasons we don't merely call the book of Hebrews a letter. Instead, the setting we've been discussing—along with this verse—leads us to believe it's a sermon made into a letter. "Word of exhortation" is language used to describe a synagogue homily or sermon.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the word was used in Acts 13:15 to speak of Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch. The most plausible scenario in my mind is that the author wrote and intended to preach this sermon in person—but was not able to do so. Consequently, he sent it as a letter.<sup>6</sup>

This is important because *how* it says what it says affects how we hear it. It's to be understood from the perspective of a reader *and* the perspective of a hearer. And like other sermons,

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 431.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, 429.

<sup>5</sup> Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, 417.

it's *not* an academic treatise. It aims to persuade. You can hear that in verse 22's verbs. **I urge you, and bear with.** This isn't speech and debate tournament. He's not aiming to impress with his vast knowledge of the tabernacle, with the eloquence with which he tells the Old Testament story in Hebrews 11, nor with his command of biblical theology. His words about Christ are words of exhortation. Those hearing these words are urged to listen willingly.<sup>7</sup>

This is where what I mentioned in the introduction comes into focus. There is exposition. And there is exhortation. Let's consider a few excerpts from within this book of exhortation. In chapter 2:1 they're exhorted to pay much closer attention to what they have heard, so that they do not drift away from it (2:1). In chapter 3, as partakers of a heavenly calling, they are to **consider Jesus** (3:1). They're to take care, **that there not be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart** (3:12). They're to encourage one another day after day (3:13). They're to be diligent to enter God's rest (4:11). They're to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace (4:16). They're to press on to maturity (6:1). They're to be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (6:12). With a cleansed conscience, they're to serve the living God (9:14).

And at the end of the longest argument of the book, they're told to draw near with a sincere heart. They're to draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. They're to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. They're to consider how they might stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of themselves (10:22–25). They're to have assurance concerning things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1). As mentioned earlier, they're to lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles (12:1). They're to run with endurance (12:1), to not grow weary, nor lose heart (12:3). They're to strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble (12:12). They're to make straight paths for feet (12:13), to pursue peace with all men (12:14), to make sure no one comes short of the grace of God (12:15).

And at this point, 12 chapters in, we've still barely even touched the imperatives in the book. Chapter 13 begins with loving the brethren, showing hospitality, remembering the prisoners, holding marriage in honor, making sure that our character is free from the love of money, imitating the faith of leaders, obeying and submitting to them, continually offering a sacrifice of praise, and not neglecting doing good and sharing (13:1–17).

For a book not littered with commands, that's quite a bit of exhortation, is it not? Hearing it all in a few paragraphs can be quite overwhelming. It's most likely that *they* would've heard the letter in one sitting. So, you can imagine how the weight of the exhortations might have something of a cumulative effect. If you were struggling with a temptation to go back into something easier, a comfort zone, something you *wouldn't* be imprisoned for, after hearing this letter you too might need to be told to **bear with this word of exhortation.**

Further, you might need to be reminded *how* you would be able to do any of this.

### 3. **The Blessing of the Sermon–Letter** (vv. 20–21; 25)

Again, not unlike Isaac blessing his sons with his final words, and Jacob doing the same with the sons of Joseph (Heb. 11:20–21), the author of Hebrews ends his words to these Jewish Christians with a prayer of blessing.

Verse 20: **Now the God of peace.** Keep in mind the situation *around* those hearing this letter. They'd endured a great conflict of sufferings. Their possessions had been seized. They'd been made a public spectacle (10:32–34). They were experiencing significant stress from those around them.<sup>8</sup> Of course they longed for peace.

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<sup>7</sup> Cockerill, 720; Harris, 428.

<sup>8</sup> Schreiner, 428.

As you know, significant stress from *outside* can affect relationships with people we love. So, *as* these believers were being persecuted, Hebrews 12 instructs them to pursue peace with one another (12:14). They needed peace with those outside the community, *while* pursuing it with one another. It's certain they also needed peace *within*. For that need, the author of Hebrews writes, there is a God of peace. To the degree we need it, might we know the same.

Verse 20 goes on to say that He—the God of peace—**brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep**. Though the resurrection hasn't been explicitly front and center in this book, that doesn't mean it hasn't been mentioned. For example, in Hebrews 5 we read: **He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard** (Heb. 5:7). Then, in chapter 7, when the author contrasts Christ's priesthood with that of Levitical priesthood, he writes that Christ became a priest, **not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life** (7:16).

Those are two verses that hint at resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Yet, *this* verse in chapter 13 is probably the clearest reference in the entire book. And maybe you're starting to see what this blessing intends to do. First, it reminds those reading this letter of who God is, partly by reminding them of what He's done. The God of peace brought One up from the dead.

How is this risen One described here? **Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep**. The author of Hebrews knows his Old Testament. The Lord is a Shepherd (Ps. 23). Sheep have gone astray (Is. 53). But the author of Hebrews knows the Old Testament pointed to the New. The great Shepherd of the sheep isn't a hired hand. When the wolf comes, He didn't flee. Instead, the good Shepherd laid down His life (John 10:11–12).

How do we know this Shepherd laid down His life? The God of peace brought Him up from the *dead*. But, also, this verse goes on to indicate *why* He brought Him up. Verse 20: **Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant**.

There is *so* much here. The fact that He brought up Christ **through the blood** indicates that God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice is the basis of a covenant.<sup>10</sup> This covenant is of course *new*, the *better* covenant detailed in Hebrews 8. Because of the provision of Christ's blood, there's a new *person*—God writes His law on our hearts—and there's a new *people*—everyone knows the Lord, from the least to the greatest (8:10–11).

And in this blessing, we read that this new and better covenant is an *eternal* covenant. Hebrews 5 made clear that the Son became the source of *eternal* salvation (5:10). Hebrews 9:12 spoke of Him obtaining *eternal* redemption. Hebrews 9:15 spoke of an *eternal* inheritance. So, of course, Hebrews 13:20 speaks of an *eternal* covenant.

Why? This blessing continues to repeat themes from earlier in the letter. Neither the Mosaic covenant—nor the Mosaic priesthood—endured. Neither were intended to. They were intended to point to another. Recall the contrast in Hebrews 7: **Jesus, . . . because He continues forever, holds his priesthood permanently. Therefore, He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them** (7:24–25). Hebrews 7 already told us *why* there's an eternal redemption, an eternal salvation, an eternal inheritance, and a covenant that does not end. Because *He* does not end.

And, if you can believe it, all that is intro to the blessing. But it's foundational to the blessing. While the exhortations of Hebrews tell us to do things we cannot do on our own, the

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<sup>9</sup> We could list more, but in Hebrews the resurrection is often considered *within* the category—or under the umbrella—of His ascension/exaltation. And this actually makes quite a bit of sense. He *can't* ascend if He hasn't been saved “out of?” death. Or, said yet another way, He *can't* be at the right hand of the Father if He's *still* in the tomb.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, 424.

exposition about Christ has told us that we most certainly will. And this blessing gathers up themes *from* that exposition to remind us *why* we will. Verse 20: **Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant.** In short, may *He*—the One who *is* all that—and did all *that*—verse 21: **equip you in every good thing to do His will.**

The God of peace, the One that raised the great Shepherd, *He* equips you to do His will. And not just this or that aspect of it, “every good thing” refers to all the benefits Hebrews has outlined thus far.<sup>11</sup> *How* will He equip you? Verse 21 goes on, **working in us that which is pleasing in His sight.** Maybe that sounds like something Paul wrote: **For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure** (Phil. 2:13).

God works in us, equipping us to do His will; and He does this **through Jesus Christ.** Jesus came to save you. His death and resurrection brought that certainty about. But Jesus also came to transform you. His ascension and ongoing intercession make that just as certain.

And all this is for a purpose, which is what this blessing builds to, and ends with: **to whom be the glory forever. Amen.**

## Conclusion

As you see, there’s no fancy conclusion to the letter of Hebrews. Instead, at the end, the author ties together many of the theological themes from the book. And then, *with* those themes, he prays for a people he loves, a people he longs to see transformed by the work of Christ. And *as* he prays a blessing over them, he’s pointing them *yet again* to the sufficiency of Christ’s work.

Back in Hebrews 6, he was convinced of better things concerning them. In Hebrews 13, he’s still convinced. Here he’s urging them to bear with this word of exhortation. Because, though he’s repeatedly told them they must endure, he makes sure to end the letter telling them how and why they will.

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<sup>11</sup> Harris, 425.