

## YOUR FAITH IS SHOWING, PARDON ME

### Hebrews 13

As you read this last chapter in Hebrews, we get the impression that the writer had a great deal of miscellaneous matter to discuss and saved it till the end. In Heb 12, we were rejoicing on Mt. Zion; and now we are discussing such everyday topics as hospitality, marriage, church officers, and who was the last one to be released from jail.

But in the Bible, there is no division between doctrine and duty, revelation and responsibility. The two always go together. The emphasis in this last section of the book is on living by faith. The writer presented the great examples of faith in Heb 11, and the encouragements to faith in Heb 12. In Heb 13, he presented the evidences of faith that should appear in our lives if we are really walking by faith and not by sight. There are four such evidences.

#### **Enjoying Spiritual Fellowship** (Heb. 13:1-6)

The basis for this fellowship is brotherly love. As Christians, these Hebrew people no doubt had been rejected by their friends and families. But the deepest kind of fellowship is not based on race or family relationship; it is based on the spiritual life we have in Christ. A church fellowship based on anything other than love for Christ and for one another simply will not last. "Brotherly love", Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9-10; 1 Peter 1:22; and 2 Peter 1:7.

Where there is true Christian love, there will also be hospitality (Heb 13:2). This was an important ministry in the early church because persecution drove many believers away from their homes. Also, there were traveling ministers who needed places to stay (3 John 5-8). Many poor saints could not afford to stay in an inn; and since the churches met in homes (Rom 16:5), it was natural for a visitor to just stay with his host. Pastors are supposed to be lovers of hospitality (Titus 1:8); but all saints should be "given to hospitality" (Rom 12:13).

Moses (Gen 18) gives the story of Abraham showing generous hospitality to Jesus Christ and two of His angels. Abraham did not know who they were when he welcomed them; it was only later that he discovered the identities of his illustrious guests. You and I may not entertain angels in a literal sense (though it is possible); but any stranger could turn out to be a messenger of blessing to us. (The word "angel" simply means "messenger.") Often we have had guests in our home who have turned out to be messengers of God's blessings.

Love also expresses itself in concern (Heb 13:3). It was not unusual for Christians to be arrested and imprisoned for their faith. To identify with these prisoners might be dangerous; yet Christ's love demanded a ministry to them. To minister to a Christian prisoner in the name of Christ is to minister to Christ Himself (Matt 25:36,40). In our free country we are not arrested for our religious beliefs; but in other parts of the world, believers suffer for their faith. How we need to pray for them and share with them as the Lord enables us!

The home is the first place where Christian love should be practiced (Heb 13:4). A Christian home begins with a Christian marriage in the will of God. This means loyalty and purity. Sex outside of marriage is sinful and destructive. Sex within the protective bonds of marriage can be enriching and glorifying to God. Fornication is committed by unmarried persons and adultery by married persons.

(However, in the New Testament, the term "fornication" can refer to many kinds of sexual sins. Acts 15:20 and 1 Cor 6:18.)

How does God judge fornicators and adulterers? Sometimes they are judged in their own bodies (Rom 1:24-27). Certainly, they will be judged at the final judgment (Rev 21:8; 22:15). Believers who commit these sins certainly may be forgiven, but they will lose rewards in heaven (Eph 5:5 ff). David was forgiven, but he suffered the consequences of his adultery for years to come; and he suffered in the hardest way: through his own children.

In these days, when sexual sins are paraded as entertainment in movies and on television, the church needs to take a stand for the purity of the marriage bond. A dedicated Christian home is the nearest thing to heaven on earth, and it starts with a Christian marriage.

If we love God and others as we should, then we will have a right relationship to material things (Heb 13:5-6). Times of suffering can either be times of selfishness or times of service. It is not easy to take "joyfully the spoiling of your goods" (Heb 10:34). But with the economic and ecological problems in our world today, comfortable Christians may soon find themselves doing without some luxuries that they now consider necessities.

Contentment cannot come from material things, for they can never satisfy the heart. Only God can do that. "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). When we have God, we have all that we need. The material things of life can decay or be stolen, but God will never leave us or forsake us. This promise was made to Joshua when he succeeded Moses (Deut 31:7-8; Josh 1:5,9); and it is fulfilled to us in Jesus Christ (Matt 28:20; Acts 18:9-10).

The affirmation of faith in Heb 13:6 comes from Ps 118:6. This is a messianic psalm and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, so we may claim this promise for ourselves. It was a source of great peace to the early Christians to know that they were safe from the fear of man, for no man could do anything to them apart from God's will. Men might take their goods, but God would meet their needs.

I have found a promise that helps me when I am afraid. It is Ps 56:3 "I will trust in Thee". But also, a better promise than that! Isa 12:2, "will trust and not be afraid."

Both promises are true and each has its own application. The important thing is that we know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Helper, and that we not put our trust in material things. Contented Christians are people with priorities, and material things are not high on their priority lists.

### **Submitting to Spiritual Leadership** (Heb. 13:7-9, 17, 24)

Three times the writer used the designation, "Them that have the rule over you." The phrase refers to the spiritual leaders of the local assemblies. The church is an organism, but it is also an organization. If an organism is not organized, it will die! Wherever Paul went, he founded local churches and ordained qualified believers to lead them (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). "Saints ... bishops [elders], and deacons" (Phil 1:1) summarize the membership and leadership of the New Testament churches.

Each Christian has three responsibilities toward the spiritual leaders in his local church.

**Remember them** (vv. 7-9). The word "remember" may suggest that these leaders were dead, perhaps martyred, and should not be forgotten. How easy it is to forget the courageous Christians of the past whose labors and sacrifices make it possible for us to minister today. But while we do not worship people or give them the glory, it is certainly right to honor them for their faithful work (1 Thess 5:12-13).

These leaders probably had led the readers to Christ because the leaders had spoken the Word to them. When you recall that few Christians then had copies of the Scriptures, you can see the importance of this personal ministry of the Word. Today, we can read the Bible for ourselves, listen to radio or television sermons, and even listen on the inter-net. We are in danger of taking the Word for granted.

The believers could no longer hear their departed leaders speak, but they could imitate their faith and consider its outcome, or "end." This could refer to their deaths, suggesting that some of them were martyred. However, I believe that "the outcome of their way of life" (Heb 13:7) is given in Heb 13:8 "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Their lives pointed to Christ! Church leaders may come and go, but Jesus Christ remains the same; and it is Christ who is the center of our faith.

Never build your life on any servant of God. Build your life on Jesus Christ. He never changes.

Of course, there is always the danger of being "carried about with divers [various] and strange doctrines" (Heb 13:9). The purpose of spiritual ministry is to establish God's people in grace, so they will not be blown around by dangerous doctrines (Eph 4:11-14). Some recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews were considering going back to Jewish laws that governed foods. The writer warned them that these dietary regulations would not profit them spiritually because they never profited the Jews spiritually! The dietary laws impressed people as being spiritual, but they were only shadows of the reality that we have in Christ (Col 2:16-23).

When local churches change pastors, there is a tendency also to change doctrines or doctrinal emphases. We must be careful not to go beyond the Word of God. We must also be careful not to change the spiritual foundation of the church. It is unfortunate that there is not more doctrinal preaching today because Bible doctrine is the source of strength and growth in the church.

**Obey them** (v. 17). When a servant of God is in the will of God, teaching the Word of God, the people of God should submit and obey. This does not mean that pastors should be dictators. "Neither [be] lords over God's heritage" (1 Peter 5:3). Some church members have a flippant attitude toward pastoral authority, and this is dangerous, one day every pastor will have to give an account of his ministry to the Lord, and he wants to be able to do it with joy. A disobedient Christian will find on that day that the results of disobedience are unprofitable, not for the pastor, but for himself.

It is much easier to "win souls" than it is to "watch for souls" (Ezek 3:16-21). The larger a church grows, the more difficult it becomes to care for the sheep. Sad to say, there are some ministers whose only work is to preach and "run the program"; they have no desire to minister to the souls placed in their care. Some are even "hirelings" who work only for money, and who run away when danger is near (John 10:11-14). However, when a shepherd is faithful to watch for souls, it is important that the sheep obey him.

**Greet them** (v. 24). The Jews used to greet each other with "Shalom-peace!" The Greeks often greeted one another with "Grace!" Paul combined these two and greeted the saints with, "Grace and peace be unto you!" (1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; and all his epistles except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. When Paul wrote to pastors, he greeted them with, "Grace, mercy, and peace." I wonder why?)

The writer of the Hebrew epistle was sending his personal greetings to the leaders of the church; but this is a good example for all of us to follow. Every Christian should be on speaking terms with his pastor. Never allow any "root of bitterness" to grow up in your heart (Heb 12:15) because it will only poison you and hurt the whole church.

While it is true that each member of a local body has an important ministry to perform, it is also true that God has ordained spiritual leaders in the church. Where people permit the pastors (elders) to lead, there is usually blessing and growth. We are not talking about highhanded, egotistical dictatorship, but true spiritual leadership. This is God's pattern for the church.

### **Sharing in Spiritual Worship** (Heb. 13:10-16, 18-19)

While it is true that a New Covenant Christian is not involved in the ceremonies and furnishings of an earthly tabernacle or temple, it is not true that he is deprived of the blessings that they typify. A Jew under the Old Covenant could point to the temple, but a Christian has a heavenly sanctuary that can never be destroyed. The Jews were proud of the city of Jerusalem; but a Christian has an eternal city, the New Jerusalem. For each of an Old Testament believer's temporary earthly item, a New Covenant believer has a heavenly and eternal counterpart.

**"We have an altar"** (Heb 13:10) does not suggest a material altar on earth, for that would contradict the whole message of the epistle. In the Old Testament sanctuary, the brazen altar was the place for offering blood sacrifices, and the golden altar before the veil was the place for burning incense, a picture of prayer ascending to God (Ps 141:2). A New Covenant Christian's altar is Jesus Christ; for it is through Him that we offer our "spiritual sacrifices" to God (Heb 13:15; 1 Peter 2:5). We may set aside places in our church buildings and call them altars; but they are really not altars in the biblical sense. Why? Because Christ's sacrifice has already been made, once and for all; and the gifts that we bring to God are acceptable, not because of any earthly altar, but because of a heavenly altar, Jesus Christ.

The emphasis in this section is on separation from dead religion and identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His reproach. The image comes from the Day of Atonement. The sin offering was taken outside the camp and burned completely (Lev 16:27). Jesus Christ, our perfect sin offering, suffered and died "outside the gate" of Jerusalem. A true Christian must go out to Him spiritually speaking, to the place of reproach and rejection. "Why stay in Jerusalem when it is not your city?" asked the writer. "Why identify with the Old Covenant Law when it has been done away with in Christ?"

The readers of this epistle were looking for a way to continue as Christians while escaping the persecution that would come from unbelieving Jews. "It cannot be done," the writer stated in so many words. "Jerusalem is doomed. Get out of the Jewish religious system and identify with the Saviour who died for you." There can be no room for compromise.

The writer named two of the "spiritual sacrifices" that we offer as Christians (Heb 13:15-16). The word "spiritual" is not in contrast to "material," because material gifts can be accepted as spiritual sacrifices

(Phil 4:10-20). The word "spiritual" means "spiritual in character, to be used by the Spirit for spiritual purposes." A believer's body, presented to God, is a spiritual sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2).

The first spiritual sacrifice is continual praise to God (Heb 13:15). The words of praise from our lips, coming from our hearts, is like beautiful fruit laid on the altar. How easy it is for suffering saints to complain, but how important it is for them to give thanks to God.

The second spiritual sacrifice is good works of sharing (Heb 13:16). This would certainly include the hospitality mentioned in Heb 13:2, as well as the ministry to prisoners in Heb 13:3. "Doing good" can cover a multitude of ministries: sharing food with the needy; transporting people to and from church or other places; sharing money; perhaps just being a helpful neighbor.

Next the writer emphasizes the importance of prayer (Heb 13:18-19). He was unable to visit the readers personally, but he did want their prayer help. It is possible that some of his enemies had lied about him, so he affirms his honesty and integrity. We do not know for certain who the writer was. Many think it was Paul. The reference to Timothy in Heb 13:23 would suggest Paul, as would also the "benediction of grace" in Heb 13:25 (2 Thess 3:17-18). Some scholars have suggested that Peter referred to Paul's authorship of Hebrews (2 Peter 3:15-16); but that statement could also be applied to things Paul wrote in Romans. We do not know the name of the human writer of this book, nor is it important that we do.

### **Experiencing Spiritual Lordship** (Heb. 13:20-21)

This benediction seems to gather together the major themes of Hebrews: peace, the resurrected Christ, the blood, the covenant, spiritual perfection (maturity), God's work in the believer. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ died for the sheep (John 10:11). As the Great Shepherd, He lives for the sheep in heaven today, working on their behalf. As the Chief Shepherd, He will come for the sheep at His return (1 Peter 5:4). Our Shepherd cares for His own in the past, present, and future. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

Our Great High Priest is also our Great Shepherd. When He was on earth, He worked for us when He completed the great work of redemption (John 17:4). Now that He is in heaven, He is working in us to mature us in His will and bring us to a place of spiritual perfection. We will never reach that place until He returns (1 John 2:28-3:3); but while we are waiting, we are told to continue to grow.

**The phrase "make you perfect"** (Heb 13:21) is the translation of one Greek word, *katartidzo*. This is an unfamiliar word to us, but it was familiar to the people who received this letter. The doctors knew it because it meant "to set a broken bone." To fishermen it meant "to mend a broken net" (Matt 4:21). To sailors it meant "to outfit a ship for a voyage." To soldiers it meant "to equip an army for battle. "

Our Saviour in heaven wants to equip us for life on earth. Tenderly, He wants to set the "broken bones" in our lives so that we might walk straight and run our life-races successfully. He wants to repair the breaks in the nets so that we might catch fish and win souls. He wants to equip us for battle and outfit us so that we will not be battered in the storms of life. In brief, He wants to mature us so that He can work in us and through us that which pleases Him and accomplishes His will.

How does He equip us? By tracing this word *katartidzo* in the New Testament, we can discover the tools that God uses to mature and equip His children. He uses the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17) and prayer (1

Thess 3:10) in the fellowship of the local church (Eph 4:11-12). He also uses individual believers to equip us and mend us (Gal 6:1). Finally, He uses suffering to perfect His children (1 Peter 5:10), and this relates to what we learned from Heb 12 about chastening.

What a difference it would make in our lives if we would turn Heb 13:20-21 into a personal prayer each day. "Lord, make me perfect in every good work to do Thy will. Work in me that which is well-pleasing in Thy sight. Do it through Jesus Christ and may He receive the glory."

The basis for this marvelous work is "the blood of the everlasting covenant" (Heb 13:20). This is the New Covenant that was discussed in Heb 8, a covenant based on the sacrifice discussed in Heb 10. Because this New Covenant was a part of God's eternal plan of salvation, and because it guarantees everlasting life, it is called "the everlasting covenant." But apart from the death of Jesus Christ, we can share in none of the blessings named in this profound benediction.

The "Amen" at the end of the benediction closed the body of the epistle. All that remained was for the writer to add a few words of greeting and personal information.

He had written a long letter, and in it he had dealt with some profound and difficult doctrines; so, he encouraged his readers to "bear with [suffer]" this letter of encouragement. This seems like a long letter to us, but he felt it was just a "few words." No doubt some members of the congregation responded negatively to this letter, while others received it and acted on it. Paul (1 Thess 2:13) tells us how we should respond to God's Word

What Timothy's relationship to the group was, we do not know. He was a prominent minister in that day and most of the Christians would either know him or know about him. These personal touches remind us that God is interested in individuals and not just in groups of people.

"They of Italy salute you" (Heb 13:24) could mean that the writer was in Italy at the time, or that saints from Italy were with him and wanted to send their greetings.

These personal references at the end of the letter raise questions that we cannot answer now. But the total impact of Hebrews answers the important question, "How can I stand firm in a world that is shaking all around me?" The answer: know the superior Person, Jesus Christ; trust His superior priesthood; and live by the superior principle of faith. Build your life on the things of heaven that will never shake.

Be confident! Jesus Christ saves to the uttermost!