

Remember Your Leaders

Kevin Hay

Hebrews 13: 7-8

September 10, 2023

I'd like to invite and encourage you to open your Bibles now with me to the Book of Hebrews chapter 13. Hebrews 13 is where we'll be. And while you're finding your place in Hebrews, I want to take just a few minutes to help us understand the background of the book as well as the specific context of where we find ourselves as we dive into the 13th chapter. And of course for the next six weeks, this is the passage that we will be in, verses seven through 21.

So right from the outset, we can say that the Book of Hebrews is both one of the most unique and theologically profound books in all of Scripture. Because on the one hand we have no idea who the author is and we have no idea who the specific audience is. There's certainly speculation on both of those points, but nothing definitive. But on the other hand, we have this incredibly rich theological treatise on the gospel and the work of Christ that is found within its pages. And so what we can say with certainty then is that the author of Hebrews wrote what ultimately amounts to a written sermon to a group of people who already had a thorough understanding of the Old Testament. In other words, the author just presumes that his audience already has this detailed working knowledge of the Jewish religion and its history, along with all of its practices.

At the same time, the author frequently quotes from the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And then finally he speaks of the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system, and he speaks of it in the present tense, which tells us a lot about when he is writing. So when we combine all of those details together, it's likely that the author of Hebrews is writing to an audience of professing Jewish believers who were part of a Hellenistic or Greek culture sometime before 70 AD when the temple was destroyed. Most scholars believe we're looking at the early to mid-sixties for the date of writing.

Based upon the content of the letter, there are some obvious points of background information that we are able to piece together about this particular group of professing Jewish believers. First, we're able to see from this letter that there's clearly some bad theology, even heretical theology, that's being embraced by some within the church. Secondly, we can also conclude that this Jewish audience was either experiencing persecution at this time or at least the serious threat of persecution for professing faith in Christ. The hostility they were experiencing was of such intense magnitude that it was causing some of them to ask the question, "Is Jesus worth it? Is Jesus worth it?" Amen.

In asking that question, what they're being tempted to do is to revert back to a Judaism without Jesus. And so it's within that context in mind that the author of Hebrews sets out to explain to this professing Jewish audience why Jesus is indeed worth it, why Jesus is worth all of the pain, and why Jesus is worth all of the persecution and the suffering and the hatred that true genuine

believers often experience while living in this world. He's going to do that in two major ways. First, he's going to explain in great detail what ends up being the theme of the letter, which is the absolute superiority of Jesus Christ above all things, the absolute superiority of Jesus Christ above all. But then secondly, alongside that theme are a number of exhortations and warnings that are written to encourage these professing believers to remain faithful and to endure in the midst of all of those challenges.

And so it's with that in mind that we're going to dive in now to this final chapter of this letter of Hebrews in chapter 13. For this evening, we're just going to begin by unpacking verses seven and eight. So Hebrews 13:7-8, and in honor of God's Word, if you are able, I'll ask now that you stand for the reading of God's Word from Hebrews 13:7-8, and there God's Word reads: "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." And you can be seated as we pray.

Well, Father, it is only through this name and the person of Jesus Christ that we are able to come boldly before Your throne this evening, and we rejoice in that confidence. Lord, we're so thankful that when You look upon us as Your children You no longer look upon us through the lens of our sins and our failures and our shame. But God, You look at us through the lens of the perfect righteousness of Your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank You for this evening and this opportunity that we have to open Your Word together, to kneel as it were as little children to hear from You as You speak to us through Your Word. And so I ask, Father, that You will help us, O God, to see with clarity and hear without distraction, Lord, what You have to share with us tonight. I pray that You'll be with us throughout this entire study, this series as we walk our way through this passage that is so vitally important to the life of our church and to the life of all believers. Be with us, O God, in a special way I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.

Well, there is a theme in Scripture that is repeated again and again. It's found, in fact, in both the Old and the New Testament, but it is rarely stated in an explicit fashion. In fact, in most instances it's a theme that is presented to us in God's Word as a kind of presupposition, as if we should all just know it already. Scripture just confidently presumes that it is a universal problem for all human beings that we are already intimately familiar with, and that theme is the problem with forgetting. Can you relate to that? The problem with forgetting. And so it's for that reason again and again that we find this biblical call, this exhortation to remember. And to help you understand what I mean, Psalm 77:11 and 12 says this, "I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work and meditate on Your mighty deeds." In other words, I will not forget.

Psalm 103, David says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." Don't forget all that He's done. Psalm 106 tells the tragic story of God's goodness and grace to the Israelites and their failure to remember all that He had done for them. And so over two dozen times in the Psalms alone, we

find this exhortation to remember. Why? Because we are a forgetful people, are we not? We often find ourselves suffering from spiritual amnesia, if you will. Our thoughts are fleeting, our feelings are fickle, and our faith waivers. The words Come Thou Fount are far too often an accurate description of our minds when it says, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."

So it's for that reason that Scripture repeatedly calls us to remember, to call to mind the truth of God's Word and the realities that can realign our thinking, reform our priorities, and reestablish us in the faith. That's part of the importance of gathering together corporately on a weekly basis, to be reminded of who God is, to be reminded of all that He has done for us in Christ, and to be reminded of who He's called us to be. And so as we begin to walk our way through this evening's text, that's exactly what the author of Hebrews is calling the church to do, in particular to remember your leaders. Remember your leaders.

So this is an exhortation for believers to recall in their minds specific men who once led them faithfully in the faith. And the word translated leader here is really a verb, not a noun, so it's little deceptive when we read it in some English translations because it means to rule or to go before. So it's an action. This is a reference to the men who used to be the elders and the pastors of this church. It's the men who had been called by God to shepherd the sheep of Christ's flock, men who were spiritually gifted and called by God and morally qualified according to the standard we find in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

To help us see this picture more vividly, we can think of Jesus's own words from the 10th chapter of John's gospel. It's there that the Lord refers to Himself as the prophetic good shepherd and in verses two through four, He says this, "He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens, the sheep hear his voice. And he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him for they know his voice." And so this is the biblical picture of elders or pastors of the local church.

In fact, the apostle Peter exhorts elders in his first epistle using that exact same imagery. We find the passage in 1 Peter 5:1-5 where Peter says this, "So I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed. Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but willingly as God would have you, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. "And when the chief shepherd appears, you'll receive the unfading crown of glory."

And so to be an elder or a pastor of the church is to be an under-shepherd of Christ Jesus who like the great shepherd of the sheep goes before His people and leads them. And as those men follow the lead of Christ, the sheep are called to follow those men. That's the biblical pattern. And so the author of Hebrews is exhorting these believers to begin recalling in their minds those men who have led them and served them in years past as elders and pastors, those men who have cared for their souls with great diligence and have led them in the faith. As we work our way

through this text, I want to encourage you this evening to do the same. We're going to be looking at some of the specific characteristics of the pastors who are worthy to be remembered, but I just want you to begin thinking in your own mind of those pastors in your own life who perhaps have already gone on to be with the Lord or who simply led you in the faith during a particular season of your walk with the Lord. Begin recalling them in your mind.

And as you do, we'll be asking the question, "What are the characteristics of those elders or pastors which makes them worthy of our remembrance?" Why is it helpful for us to think of them? The author of Hebrews is going to provide us with three characteristics and reasons for doing so. And so starting with the first one, ***these pastors are men who faithfully taught a doctrine worth remembering, a doctrine worth remembering.*** The author of Hebrews describes these men in our text as those who spoke to you the Word of God. And so the question then is, why is speaking or teaching the Word of God the primary criteria for whether an elder or pastor should be remembered by us in a loving and honorable way? Why is that important?

Well, first, because it is the God-ordained means by which the Lord grows His church. He does it through the Word. So we see throughout Scripture, beginning all the way back in Genesis, that God creates through His Word. We find in Scripture that God saves sinners by His Word. He sanctifies us with the word. He encourages us in the word. He convicts us by the word. We are restored back to a right relationship with him in the word. We are equipped by God through the word, and it is the very Word of God that He uses to shape and mold us into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. And so it's for this reason that Steve Lawson has rightly said this, "Doing God's work God's way requires an unwavering commitment to the primacy of biblical preaching and teaching. The church experiences spiritual vitality not because of gimmicky techniques, but because it focuses on the priority of biblical teaching. Sound doctrine reaches every aspect of the church's life. Everything flows from the pure fountain of biblical truth. Biblical preaching must always occupy the leading place of influence in the life of the church. At the core of any healthy congregation is a vibrant exposition of God's Word."

And so these leaders are to be honored in the believer's memory because they gave them the words of eternal life. But then the second reason that teaching the word merits honorable remembrance is because the Word of God is the only infallible authority, not only by which God grows the church, but by which He governs the church. I want to make this very clear, the Bible provides no other basis for the authority of elders and pastors except for the Word of God which they preach. The authority of pastors and elders is anchored to the very Words of God. And so the authority these leaders possessed is exclusively anchored to the word they proclaim. So make sure we see that connection. This is not an arbitrary authority, this is an authority that's vested by Christ through the word to these men.

And not only does that help us to think rightly about the authority of the elders and pastors here at Redeemer, but it also emphasizes what the leaders of Christ's church are called to do. We can look to the standard of Scripture to see exactly who we're called to be. So pastors and elders are not called to give TED Talks or to share the latest cultural trend. We're not called to be

entertainers or to wade into wild speculation. No, the calling of Christ's under-shepherds is to lead, feed, and protect the sheep of God's flock through the proclamation of God's Word. And I'm thankful that we have a congregation that is grateful and thankful for that type of shepherding. I praise God for it.

And therefore, not only should we periodically take the opportunity to reflect upon those elders or pastors from the past who have faithfully taught us the Word of God and express our gratitude to the Lord for them, but we should also allow that gratitude to overflow into our appreciation for those who are faithfully leading us and teaching us God's Word now in the present. Amen.

Amen.

And so it's that emphasis on the Word of God that has been a consistent theme throughout the entire Book of Hebrews. These leaders were the men who spoke to these people of God the very Word of God, which is described in the opening verses of Hebrews, which says this, familiar words you've heard before, "Long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things through whom also He created the world."

These are the men who understood the magnitude and the nature of God's Word, which is powerfully described for us in Hebrews 4:12-13 saying this, "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account." These leaders are likely the very ones from chapter five verse 12 who taught these believers "the basic principles of the oracles of God."

And so the author of Hebrews wants these believers to set the gaze of their minds on those who faithfully ministered to their souls and the Word of God with the Word of God. The question we need to be asking is, "Why would he want them to do that? Why is it valuable for us to go through such a mental exercise periodically?" Well, he's essentially adding them to the great cloud of witnesses from chapter 11, which we commonly know as the great Hall of Faith, which declares that though they died, they still speak. What do they speak? They speak the doctrinal truth of God's Word, the truth of the gospel that never changes but that saves sinners and transforms them by grace and for God's glory.

And so in that way, the author of Hebrews is calling these believers to recall the foundational truths of the gospel that they were taught all the way at the very beginning, to go back to when their profession of faith began, to step back and remember the truth that they professed to believe at the very start of their salvation. And I want us again to do the same. Think back to the very first day when you professed faith in Jesus Christ. And those people who were instrumental in sharing the truth of the gospel with you, recall them in your mind.

And as we do that, it's one thing to remember those who have taught faithfully, but it's quite another to remember those who have both taught God's Word faithfully and who have died faithfully for that word. And so as we continue in our text, we're next going to discover the

second characteristic of these former church leaders, ***which is a conduct worth considering, a conduct worth considering***. If you look there with me, we see that the author of Hebrews continues in the second part of verse seven by saying, "Consider the outcome of their way of life."

I loved what one commentator had to say on this point. In contrast to those listed in Hebrews 11, he said, "There is something in the vivid recollection of a life that we have seen which cannot be conveyed by a record that comes to us only by reading or hearing." In other words, a life that is lived faithfully before our eyes is far more meaningful than one that we've simply read about or heard about from afar. We've seen that life with our own eyes. We've seen how they've faithfully taught the word, we've seen how they've responded to criticism, how they've walked through obstacles by trusting in God. And in particular, I want you to notice that the focus being considered here is not just the conduct of these leaders in general, which is to say their life, but rather the emphasis is placed upon the outcome of their conduct, which is to say the way their life ended.

And so whether these leaders are, as John Calvin believed, those who had sealed the doctrine delivered by them in their own blood through martyrdom or those who had simply rendered a faithful testimony to sound doctrine through their whole life as well as in death, either way, the call to consider is focused on the perseverance of their faith. These leaders who have died and gone on to be with the Lord have left behind for all the other living believers a legacy of endurance, one that will carry on and help to inspire those who remain. They didn't just profess faith in Christ and teach sound doctrine only in word. No, in addition to that, their lives were actually a demonstration of what the author of Hebrews describes in chapter 12 verses one and two when he said, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

In the truest sense, these leaders that these believers are being called to remember fought the fight of faith and they have finished the race. It may not have always been pretty, and it definitely was not perfect, but their life from the day of their salvation to the day of their death was marked by persistent, persevering, enduring faith. It reminds me of the life of the Puritan Thomas Goodwin. Born in 1600, Goodwin would go on to become a pastor and an author and a professor of theology. But for much of his life, what many don't understand is that Thomas Goodwin struggled with the assurance of his salvation.

It was only after realizing that the objective assurance for his salvation was solely to be found and the perfect person and perfect work of Jesus Christ that Goodwin finally found the peace and the security for which he had so long been searching. And it was that single truth that would prove to be one of the greatest means of transformation in Goodwin's life. Not only did it provide rest for his soul while he lived, but it also prepared him for the day he died. And it was on February the 23rd of 1680 as he laid on his deathbed surrounded by loved ones that Thomas

Goodwin's final words would prove to be a powerful testimony not of his unwavering faith, but of his faith in an unwavering God.

As he prepared to depart this life, here are the words that are recorded by Thomas Goodwin. He said, "I am going to the three persons with whom I have had communion. I shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye. All my lusts and corruptions I shall be rid of, which I could not be here. Those croaking toads will fall off in a moment. I could not have imagined I should ever have had such a measure of faith in this hour. Now, I could have never imagined it. My bow abides in strength. Is Christ divided? No. I have the whole of His righteousness. I'm found in Him not in my own righteousness, which is of the law, but in the righteousness, which is of God, which is by faith in Jesus Christ who loved me and gave Himself for me. Christ cannot love me better than He does. I think I cannot love Christ better than I do. I am swallowed up in God, and now I shall ever be with the Lord."

And so like Thomas Goodwin, the lives of these former elders and pastors from our text are imperfect. And yet, the characteristic pattern of their lives is marked by perseverance. They pressed on in endurance. So, the author of Hebrews is encouraging these believers who are at this moment being tempted by the obstacles of life to also press on in their faith, to endure to the end as they look to the example of those who have gone on before them. And that leads us to the third characteristic we discover concerning these church leaders, and that is ***a life worth imitating, a life worth imitating.***

If you look with me at the last part of verse seven, the author of Hebrews says, "And imitate their faith." So call to your mind former pastors who faithfully taught you the Word of God, consider the way they persevered all the way to the end, and imitate their faith because their lives are worthy of imitation. Their lives are a demonstration of how faith works in our lives to persevere us as God preserves us in the faith. We see the same idea in 1 Corinthians 11:1 where Paul writes, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." This word imitate is often translated in the New Testament as follow, but it means more than just generally following after another. In fact, one of the common usages of the word in the first century had to do with painting, as in one picture being copied and painted exactly like another.

And so what the author of Hebrews is actually exhorting these believers to do is to copy the persevering faith of their former leaders in every way that they can. He's already warned them throughout this letter of what the consequences are for those who walk away from the faith. Some of the most challenging passages in all of Scripture, but specifically the book of Hebrews, like the sobering warning from Hebrews 10:26, which says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

But now at the end of this letter, he's using the positive pattern of those who have lived out their faith before them, and he's calling them to copy that example. His goal, of course, is to inspire and encourage them to get rid of any thoughts about throwing in the towel. He wants them to put aside any of those doubts and to keep running the race and make it to the finish line. And perhaps this evening you are sitting there and you're thinking, "I can relate." Maybe the challenges that

you are facing have caused you to ask the same question, "Is Christ worth it? Isn't there an easier way?" Well, it would be easy for me to just say absolutely Christ is worth it, but there's no doubt that there is spine-strengthening encouragement found in the examples provided by those who have gone before us.

So again, perhaps you can think of those faithful pastors who have preached the Word of God to you and live faithfully before your eyes and persevered to the end. If so, follow their example. But if not, I'm also reminded this evening of the lives of Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley living in the 16th century under the reign of Mary I, or Bloody Mary as she's often known. The daughter of Henry VIII made it her personal goal of her monarchy to restore England's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. And so during her bloody reign, a total of 288 Protestant reformers were burned at the stake. Two of them were Ridley and Latimer. These men refused to honor the Pope, and they refused to embrace the Catholic Mass, and Bloody Mary was set to make them pay.

So in 1555, Latimer and Ridley were tied to a stake in the streets of Oxford, England. The very spot is still visible there today. And with a large crowd gathered around them, some weeping while others taunted and laughed, the stake upon which they were tied was ignited and as the flames began to engulf that stake, it is recorded that Latimer cried out to his brother in Christ, Ridley, saying, "Be of good cheer, Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day by God's grace light up such a candle in England as I trust will never be put out." And not only did the flame of the gospel spread throughout England and beyond, but it is examples like those that put steel in our spiritual spine, don't they? They propel us to press on and to follow the footsteps of those who have gone before. Why? Because Christ is worth it. Christ is worth it. In fact, Christ is precisely where the author of Hebrews points his audience and by application us this evening.

So if you look with me at verse eight of our text, we're next going to discover a shepherd worth worshiping, a shepherd worth worshipping. He says there, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." We'll see next week that this eighth verse serves as really a hinge verse for both verse seven and nine. It's important following verse seven, and it is also important leading us into verse nine. But here I want us to notice that the author of Hebrews is really anticipating the response of his audience. It's as if he's preparing for them to downplay the Lord's activity in their lives as if their lives are in no way comparable to that great cloud of witnesses from back in chapter 11. And so he wants them to understand that while the outward circumstances of life may change, and while the specific challenges that we face may be different, we do not have to worry about a changing Christ.

As Charles Spurgeon once said, "I have seen men change. A little frost turns the green forest to bronze, and every leaf forsakes its hold and yields to the winter's blast. So fade our friends and the most attached adherence drop away from us in the time of trial. But Jesus is to us what He always was. Whatever was in the heart of Christ before the stars began to shine, that same infinite love is there today." And therefore, the same great shepherd who was there commending Abel is there with you today. The same savior who warned and instructed Noah that a flood was

coming, and that the world would be judged in righteousness is here with us today. The same Lord who protected Moses is our protector today. The same God who called out to Abraham and led him to a new land is the one who leads us today. And the same Christ who gave up His life as a ransom for our sins is the same one who sits now at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us this very moment.

Amen.

As the author of Hebrews says in chapter 11 verses 32 through 34, "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David, and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight."

My friends, the obstacles we face may be different than those of the past, but our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just as powerful today as He was back then and that He will be forever. And so there is no reason for us to doubt His strength or His love for us. And therefore it does not matter what we face in this life, whether it's political or financial or spiritual, pastors and elders themselves, they come, they go, they live, they die, but Jesus is the eternal, immutable author and perfecter of our faith. He starts it and He perfects it. He is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega and the love that our great shepherd has for us is fixed for all of eternity. So may we exalt in our minds this evening as we begin this sermon series the work of God in our midst. May we think back fondly with great adoration and affection toward all of those who have poured into our lives and who have taught to us the Word of God. And may we be encouraged to press on in following the example of those who have gone on before us, ultimately following in the very footsteps of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As Revelation 1:4 says, "Grace and peace to you from Him who is and who was and who is to come." Let's pray.

Father, You are so good to us in every season and in every condition, we find ourselves in, every state of mind, every emotion. There is truth in Your Word, which we can grab hold of like precious treasure and healing salve to heal our wounds, to encourage us along the way, to spur us on to good works. And so I praise You for these precious reminders and for this truth that is found in Your Word. Lord, I thank You for this precious gift of Your Word, and I thank You for all of those who have gathered together tonight. I pray, O God, as we continue to walk through this series that You will meet us in a special way. Father, help us not to just be hearers of Your Word, but to be doers. I pray that You would encourage our hearts through this word. Give us the encouragement to press on and persevere and not just survive in the faith, but to thrive and to bring you much glory, praise, and exaltation through the power of Your Spirit that works mightily in us. And I pray that through Redeemer Bible Church You will bring glory to Your great name as You demonstrate Your glorious grace through Your gospel throughout Gilbert and beyond. And I pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

