

November 15, 2015
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Hebrews
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Hebrews 13:20-25

1. How can you know and do God's will?
2. What does God's peace feel like?
3. What does the word "equip" mean in verse 21?
4. Who do you know who is suffering for Christ? Do you pray for that person?

GOD'S WILL Hebrews 13:20-25

Most of us have attended church services where at the end of the service the pastor raised his hand and quoted most of the words of our text (i.e. 13:20-21). It is comforting for God's people to be dismissed with the request that He who gives peace through Jesus Christ will work His will through us who are being so blessed. However, like most good traditions this one also, being overused, becomes like vain repetition that carries as much meaning as worldly sinners repeating the Apostles' Creed on Sunday morning after a night of carousing and before they go soundly asleep during the pending sermon.

In reality, this benediction and the handful of verses that follow are a fitting and challenging ending to one of the most important letters written in the history of humanity. Kent Hughes wrote: "In its original setting it was especially appropriate for the expatriate

Hebrew church as it battened down its hatches, trimmed its sails, and pointed its prow into the ominous rising seas of Roman persecution that would explode full-fury under Nero's infamy." (R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, vol. 2, Crossway Books: Wheaton, Ill., 1993, p.243)

As far as we know, there is not a Nero-type figure poised on the horizon ready to turn America into a caldron of persecution against Christians. Again, I say, "As far as we know." Things can change quite rapidly in this fast-paced world. But, Nero or not, believers in any culture face difficulties, tests, and temptations to deny Christ simply because we are living in Satan's realm. Sin, the flesh, and the devil are still very real impediments to living in a way that reflects God's holy character.

Therefore, these closing words to this amazing letter are very applicable to our lives. In this simple statement, we find an explanation of one of the complex issues of the Christian life. That issue is expressed in the common question, "How do I know if I am in God's will?" The answer to that question according to our text is, "Discover what pleases God and, through the grace He provides, do it."

God's Will Is That Which Pleases Him (vv.20-21).

It is only possible to do what pleases God because He already opened the way for us to please Him. We have the potential to please God, the opportunities to please Him because He has offered peace to us. The author of the letter calls upon God with that title: *Now may the God of peace (v.20a)*.

The writer calls God the God of peace because peace is a foundational trait of God. He is by nature peaceful and absent of strife. He is by nature eternally at peace. He is by nature the fulfillment of the Hebrew concept *shalom*. The general meaning behind the root for this word is completion and fulfilment. Therefore, to experience *shalom* is to enter into a state of wholeness and unity, a restored relationship. In our case, we have peace when we enter into a relationship with God who is everything that He ought to be, lacking nothing, and, therefore, at perfect peace with Himself the Creator. We are not.

Because we are not naturally at peace, we desire very much to have peace. People who are on the cusp of persecution and chaos because of their faith desire to have that peace from God very much. It is not that we are weak and unable or unwilling to stand for Christ in the face of resistance. We do believe what the Bible teaches about Christ. We do believe that He is the far better way as *Hebrews* contrasts Him to the old covenant under the law. We really do trust Christ in daily matters. But no sensible person is comfortable with threats, rejection, or mockery because of our faith in Christ.

Even people who are not facing persecution for their faith also long for God's peace. They do not realize this peace is available only from their Creator who they deny. Therefore, they search for tranquility and peace through meditation, yoga, ecstatic dancing, or various drugs.

In contrast to that norm, we who trust Christ have the right, based on God's promises, to expect to be at peace with our Creator. Isaiah promised regarding God, *You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you (Isaiah 26:3)*. What nearly all natural people in the world search for but never find is what we can expect from God. That is precisely what Jesus promised to the disciples and us who trust Him. He said, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"* (John 14:27).

Why do people who trust Christ have God's promise of peace, but those who do not trust Him cannot find such peace. It is because God offers peace through Jesus Christ's blood. He is 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 (v.20b)*. Jesus is the risen Shepherd of the sheep. It is through the raising of our Shepherd from the dead that our Creator initiates peace between Himself and us fallen creatures. He desires for us to be the sheep of His pasture.

This Shepherd/sheep picture would have been very familiar to the people who read this letter originally. It is a relationship pictured best by David's Shepherd Psalm. *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the*

valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Psalm 23:1-6).

According to the words of this song, I have peace because I am in no need or want (v.1). I have peace as He makes me lie down in green pastures beside still waters (v.2). I have peace as He restores my soul and leads me in righteous paths (v.3). I have peace even in the most difficult circumstances – like the valley of death (v.4). I have peace as God prepares a feast for me in the presence of my enemies (v.5). I have peace because God gives me His mercy, and goodness, and allows me to live in His presence (v.6).

This is an amazing relationship in light of the reality that I was born God's enemy and, therefore, chose to live offending Him. How is it that the Shepherd of my soul grants me peace? How is it that the offended Creator is at peace with me? The Great Shepherd offers us peace with God through His own blood. It is the blood of the *eternal covenant*. Throughout this letter the author has pointed out how the blood of Christ is superior to all the blood of thousands of animal sacrifices. The blood Christ shed on the cross is sufficient to cover the penalty of our sins. The blood of the cross opened the way into the presence of God where penitent sinners find grace and mercy as God makes things right between us. That is the eternal covenant. It will never change.

In fact, through the blood of Christ, God the Creator reconciles everything to Himself. Paul encouraged the Christians in the region around Colossae that it was God's plan, *through him [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20)*. Therefore, it is by faith in Christ alone we can have peace with God. *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)*.

The text teaches that I am able to have faith in the finished work of the Great Shepherd, and He is able to shepherd me only because God raised Him from the dead. Where there is no faith that Jesus is who He claims to be, no faith in His blood to forgive sin, no faith in

His resurrection, there cannot be any peace. God has accomplished all the work necessary to put us in His will where we live a life pleasing to Him.

But He has done more than that. God also equips us to please Him. He gives us everything we need to do His will. The prayer is that He who is the God of peace who raised our Great Shepherd from the dead will *equip you with everything good that you may do his will (v.21a)*.

A broken tool or worn out tool is of no value. Often when I am working with wood, I need to replace a blade on a saw or a bit on a router because worn out blades do not do good work. Also, when I am ready to cut or shape a piece of wood, it is necessary for me to prepare the tool for use by adjusting it or in some cases applying oil to the tool. This is what the word *equip* means in our text. Matthew used the word to describe how James and John were mending their nets to prepare for fishing the next night (Matt. 4:21). This is the word that describes the work of the pastor/teacher as he uses the Word of God to prepare and repair the people in the assembly to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). This is the work the spiritual person does as he or she restores a fellow believer who has been knocked down by sin (Gal. 6:1).

God has already prepared us and repaired us with everything good for doing His will. Just as God the Father gave God the Son a body specifically designed for doing His will. *Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me" (Hebrews 10:5)*. Therefore, because God the Father prepared God the Son perfectly to do the work God intended Him to do, He came specifically to do God's will. *"Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book'" (Hebrews 10:7)*.

Likewise the request here is for God to provide every good thing for doing His will — and He has! God already works in us to do His will. He is *working in us that which is pleasing in his sight (v.21b)*. Because we are still plagued by the flesh even after we are born again, God must provide active grace if we will do His will. To attempt to live the Christian life with the purest doctrine and the

finest examples, but without God's direct power, is to build with wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:12).

To that end, we have the amazing promise that God is active within the individuals who trust Christ, to do what pleases Him. Paul wrote, *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13)*. Our flesh demands that we do what is pleasing in our sight. Our human weakness even tries to convince us that God is happy to do our desires. The reality is that God must be active in the soul and life of the believer if we would ever do what pleases Him. This is the work of the Holy Spirit to which we must yield moment by moment.

God continues to work His will in us through Jesus Christ. He does this *through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (v.21c)*. Jesus Christ provided the means for us to be reconciled to God. Jesus Christ requested that the Father send the Holy Spirit to indwell us. Our response ought to be: "Praise God who has provided all things necessary for us to do what pleases Him, through Christ." That we are able to do God's will on any level is all to His glory. The person who is tempted to boast about accomplishing God's will does not understand the work God does so that we can please Him.

God's Will Is Generally Carried Out In Everyday Life (vv.22-25).

Doing the will of God is knowing and doing His words daily (v.22). The author of this letter *appeal[ed] to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly (v.22)*. This was simply a request for us brothers to hear God's Word. This is a letter written to believers in a local church. In the setting, the sound of this statement, *"I appeal to you brothers,"* would be like the words of a pastor who loves and is concerned for the people for whom he is responsible. It is the heart of the Great Shepherd for His sheep and, therefore, the heart of the under-shepherd.

Like much of the Bible, the teaching of this letter is not easy to hear. Be that as it may, it must be heard. Try to imagine what it would have been like to hear this letter read in the assembly for the first time. Surely people's minds wandered as the leader droned on page

after page (if it was in codex format). Surely some folks dozed off. Surely a number of folks were like me who has to read and re-read some of the words multiple times before grasping the meaning. This is one of those letters about which I conclude that having completed a study of each verse, it would be good to go back through it again drawing on the understanding we have gained the first time through.

When we finally grasp the truths of the letter, we are overwhelmed by God's goodness in providing Jesus Christ to save us from sin. Be that blessing as it may, there are times when we need to "bear with" God's Word. Often the authority behind the words of exhortation appear to be the human speaker. In the case of this letter, the author was careful to point out that he had conveyed God's Word to the people. It is clearly God's Word in that the writing is replete with references to God's Word in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the writing is assessed to be Scripture and, therefore, was breathed out by God.

At the same time, we learn that this whole writing should be viewed as a sermon. An *exhortation* is a sermon. In the synagogue, the lesson or application of the Scripture text that had been read was the sermon. We saw this with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. *After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it" (Acts 13:15)*. Interestingly the writer of *Hebrews* refers to this as a "short" sermon (see the word *briefly*). This short sermon takes about an hour to read through. Modern Christians would not assess that as a short sermon. Yes, but remember that long sermons in those ancient days lasted until midnight (Acts 20:7) and caused people like Eutychus to go to sleep and fall out the open window.

Long or short, if the speaker of the sermon or exhortation is faithful to speak God's Word, God is the authority. The writer wrote, and the writer appeals, but he appealed to God's authority. Only when the speaker breaches the meaning of the text does he speak on his own authority. Let the Bible speak—let God speak! That is what doing God's will looks like.

Also, doing what pleases God is being rightly related with fellow believers (vv.23-25). A right relationship with other believers will be obvious as we are concerned for those who suffer. These

people *should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon (v.23)*. That was not all that unusual in the day when the author wrote this letter. Still, many believers suffer because of their love for Christ. Obviously, Timothy had been in prison. It is possible that this period in prison interrupted his ministry as the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Likewise, we know of individuals who are imprisoned for their faith. Most of us know other believers who face various trials from employers, employees, neighbors, and family members because of their faith.

We should pray for them and be concerned for them. Love for the brothers causes us to pray for them. It is not a burden to pray for them but a privilege. We should rejoice with them when they are relieved from suffering. This is unity. This is love for the brothers.

Also, living out God's will has believers greeting each other. *Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings (v.24)*. The word greet speaks of a common greeting. It does not refer to a secret code or secret handshake. But, at the same time, the "greeting" used in the church context speaks of genuine concern. Often I will use the very common greeting, "Hi. How ya doing?" To which most of you will reply, "Fine." And that too often is the end of the conversation. Sometimes you might notice that when you say, "Fine," I might reply, "No, I mean how are you really doing?" When I say that, it means that I have been praying for you because probably we have at an earlier time talked about a specific problem or issue in your life. That is what a genuinely concerned greeting sounds like.

Here the greeting is for the leaders and all the saints in that local church. At the same time, the writer and his companions express a reciprocal concern for them.

Finally, as we live out God's will, we will live by grace. The final words are: *Grace be with all of you (v.25)*. The text has pointed out many examples of God's grace to us. We are reminded that we are born again by God's grace. We are reminded that we live by God's grace.

God's grace is so necessary for us in difficult days. Tough days lay ahead for the recipients of this letter. They needed to be encouraged that the finished work of Christ was sufficient to reconcile them to God. They needed to be focused on living in God's

will, doing what pleases Him. And so as we have come to the end of our study, we should be encouraged to live out God's will because He has already repaired us and prepared us with everything we need to please Him. Living in God's will looks a lot like loving the brothers. We should do that whether or not there is persecution.