

The Benediction

Hebrews 13:20-25

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Amen and amen. At this time, let me invite children who are four years-old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's worship as they prepare to worship the Lord and learn what it means to worship Him. And we end on an element of worship in this great sermon, this letter which was a sermon in itself to the Jewish converts. It ends with a benediction. This is appropriate for just a moment to talk about benediction. Benediction is an English word for the Latin word, "benedictus," which means "the good word," or "good words." It isn't a prayer, as you've heard me instruct before. It is a pronouncement of promise. It is a pronouncement of promise and blessing on all who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is God's truth to us in this final benediction, this good word, which also has within it a doxology. It is a poem of praise.

And this benediction is meant to be a blessing to God's people to be reminded that we begin, we are sustained, and we finish by a word of promise. But it's never a word of our promise. Our promises to the Lord are always in response, first and foremost, to His promise to us. So, these words are God's promises to us. And as they are pronounced on this congregation and the house churches that this letter was sent around to, we're meant to receive this and to be reminded that they are a people of promise. They are birthed out of promise. They are sustained by promise. They will finish because of God's promise.

But it comes to us in a very personal pastoral way. My primary emphasis today will be on verses 20 and 21. But that's not where the passage ends. But by way of introduction, I want to remind you that this has been a sermon that was written and sent to these house churches by a pastor who very much cared for them and their spiritual nurture. In fact, he finishes in verse 22, he says, "I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation for I have written to you briefly."

Now, if we were to have read this word, the book of Hebrews, in its entirety word for word, it would roughly translate into about 50 or 55 minutes. And so, reading it and as we've been expounding on it for a year, it feels much longer. And you're like, praise be to God we're finishing. But you get the point. So, it would not have been read by the members of the congregation. It would have been read for them and they would have heard it. But he says to them, "For I have written to you briefly." So, just remember, our sermons are briefer. So, bear with us.

It says, "You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes again. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who have come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with you all." So, he finishes with a blessing of grace, of God's trustworthiness, God's faithfulness, His loving kindness, which is a Hebrew word which we translate as "mercy." May God's grace and His mercy be upon you.

This sermon, as I hope most sermons are, comes from a very personal place of the one preaching it. It comes from a place where the pastor himself is learning the things of God. He would have read the Old Testament. He would have studied it. We know this because this is the one book of the New Testament that quotes the Old Testament most than any other. So, he would have studied it. He would have known it. And he's delivering it because he's considering not just what he wants to say, but as he discerns, what are the needs of the people? And so, he sends them greetings. He wants to send them Timothy. He's a familiar name to us. And he means for them to know the good word of God, the benediction.

In our day of the evangelical church, many of us in this room, perhaps, were born in the '80s or raised in the '80s, and even in the '90s. We come with this idea that the word is something we have to get into and study and understand all of it. That what makes it worthwhile is our understanding of the word.

But thanks be to God, the power of God's word is not contingent on our ability to understand it. What it is is a gift, first and foremost. It is to be received. So, I encourage you, brothers and sisters, by the power of His Holy Spirit enabled by His grace, please receive my words to you this morning in the same vein that the readers of this sermon would have received it.

With much grace and much love, now hear the benediction. Hebrews 13:20-25:

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 forever and ever. Amen. [ESV]

Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would take this word, this word given to your servant the writer of Hebrews, though we do not know his name, we know his intention. His intention was to make known the surpassing greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ. How great is your love as a heavenly Father and the work of your Spirit. That we might be a people equipped with the word with strength to endure suffering and persecution and trial. That we would be aware of our spiritual drifting, our spiritual slothfulness. But to be awakened to our need, to be enlivened by your strength and to rejoice in the word which is pronounced that we might be a people formed in the likeness of Christ to the glory of Christ and to all thanksgiving to a God of peace. We now offer this to you, a word of thanksgiving. Thank you, Lord. Now, instruct us as your people. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

So, as you see in the outline this morning, we will look together at God's purpose, our sanctification, and the glory of Christ. So, working together as we see in verses 20-21, we see outlined here first God's purpose. In verse 20 in the first part, he says, "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." What the preacher of Hebrews is announcing is that it has been from first to last God's purpose, His will, to make known first His promise of redemption.

The beginning of these final words is an announcement of God's promise of redemption. In fact, what he does is he uses a familiar wording which actually comes from Zachariah 9:11. And here, you'll hear the words echoed in these words. Here's what Zachariah 9:11 says, "As for you, also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from a waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope. Today I declare that I will restore to you double." What he was announcing, what he was echoing, is that this God who means for us to know His purpose, His will, is first and foremost as a promise of redemption. That redemption is seen in the emancipation. Now, Zachariah says He emancipates us from a waterless pit. This is biblical speak for death itself.

And his pronouncement of God's purpose of redemption comes with it that He desires that we are redeemed from this death, this death caused by sin. This has been the warning of the preacher of Hebrews throughout. But notice, he says it is a God of peace who comes to us. Now, this peace isn't simply the absence of war, it is something more than that. It is the presence of well-being, of what it means to flourish. That a God of peace desires that we experience His peace because there is a brokenness in the peace because of our sin. And so, God restores peace as a God of peace through the emancipation of redemption from our sin, through Christ, as it says here, "the blood of the eternal covenant" – which I will get to in a few moments. It is meant for us to rejoice. The final word to us is not first and foremost about our obedience. It is not first and foremost about our ability to understand. It is not first and foremost about our faithfulness. It is first and foremost about God's faithfulness. God's promise, God's peace, pronounced to us, and it is to be received. God announces His plan, His will, of redemption.

And it is appropriate, because from beginning to end, the word of God begins and ends with the promise of God. It is God's promise and purpose that brought us into being, created and made in His

image. And though we sinned, God's purpose and will was to redeem us and to return us to Himself. And He would do so through His son, Genesis 3:15. But before we could see the fulfilment of Genesis 3:15, we would see a succession of leaders, a succession of shepherds that were merely shadows of the great shepherd, Jesus Christ. But all that is to demonstrate God's purpose, His promise to redeem.

But it is more than a promise of redemption. It is also the purpose to transform. Notice what he says, "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 well pleasing in His sight." What he's announcing there is, we are not just to be a people who are forgiven. We are a people who are being transformed according to His purpose, that which is well pleasing to Him. Now, we're going to fill this in in just a moment. But it is an announcement, before we even get into the deeper sauce, that God intends to do much more than just forgive us. He's making us a people His own, that have particular ways of doing things and of living and of being, of loving and of giving, of forgiving and receiving.

We are not merely given an announcement of redemption, receive forgiveness, and then sent on our merry way. We are brought near, and we are transformed in the school of God's purpose and will as it says here, "working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight." And, forgive me, that's not the ESV rendering, that's the NIV. That's what I memorized first. It's still in the hard-drive, I'm sorry. It's there. "That which is well pleasing," well pleasing, it just makes more sense to me. So, what it means is that what pleases God, over time His purpose is that we begin to reflect that which is well pleasing to Him.

This has been the point of Hebrews, that we attend to God's word. That we attend to worship. That we attend to prayer. All these three things are things which are important to the preacher of Hebrews as he's written to them, because he says, some of you have even stopped worshipping together. Which is why the whole letter opens with God speaking to us. And he says, now He has spoken to us through His Son, formerly through His prophets and angels, but now through His Son. Well, He has spoken to us through His Son. We are to remember it. But we're also to give thanks and to give praise and prayer to our heavenly Father.

The preacher of Hebrews is reminding us that we are a theocentric people. How? Because notice what it says towards the end of verse 21, "to whom be glory forever and ever, amen." To whom is he referring? Is he referring to Jesus Christ? That would be appropriate. But the way the Greek is structured, actually what is being said here is, "to whom be glory forever and ever," it's to the Father. Because it is the Father who has begun this great work. He says, "Now may the God of peace," now this is, if we were to take out some of the phrases, it says, "Now may the God of peace equip you with everything good that you may do his will working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight, to whom be glory forever and ever." How did He do these things? He did these things by raising Jesus Christ from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant. And we all do these things through Jesus Christ. It is the Father who is to receive glory and praise forever and ever. Why? Because that is what Jesus said.

Jesus came to glorify the will of the One who sent Him. Jesus was about doing God's purpose. And so, the benediction ends with this great letter, saying, this is God's purpose, to redeem us that we might be a people redeemed but also transformed. To God be the glory forever and ever.

But God's purpose is also for us to see that this transformation, our sanctification, has particularities to it. Verse 21 says that it is "to equip you with everything good that you may do His will." As we understand what does it mean to equip us with everything good to do His will, it is first and foremost to understand that God's transformation – the word we use is "sanctification," but what does that actually mean? Yes, in some sense it means we are sanctified, we are set aside as holy ones being formed into the image of another. So, let's use some more street-level language, if you will, for just a second. It means that we enter into a school of learning. Now that sounds really fun, doesn't it? But here's the point. Sanctification is God's purpose that we might receive ethical formation. It isn't just that we are

pronounced good. He actually means to work that good in us. That it changes how we live. It is a forming. It says, that we might be made complete – is one of the translations that has been used – “equip you with everything good that you may do His will,” that you might be complete for what is God’s will.

Consider for just a moment some of the things which we might be familiar with, we might have heard from His word. It says that we might do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. That we might bear the fruit of the Spirit. That we might also love our Father, love our God, but also love our neighbor as ourselves, to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. These are but a few. But then to forgive, as we’ve heard to forgive one another as we have been forgiven. He means by the work of sanctification to work His will in us. It is to, indeed, form us ethically to change the way we live, to do particular things.

Now, for some, that may seem not very attractive. But the question is not whether it’s attractive. The question is, what school are you in? Because we live in a day and age where the idea is that the ultimate expression is the autonomous person, free to be who I am. I’m me. You can’t tell me who I am, I want to be. This is it. And so, culture tells us simultaneously that you need to be the best person you can possibly be; why don’t you buy our product? You see, the culture wants to tell us two things simultaneously. We want you to be you, we want you to be free! Hey, join this social network. Buy this book. Do this act. Buy this food. Be this kind of person. Wear these kinds of clothes. You see, the culture, no matter how much it might preach that we get to be the free, autonomous selves, they have a school. They are forming us into particular kinds of people.

The question is not whether we find any school attractive. The question is, what kind of school are you in? And the recognition of the preacher of Hebrews is, we are always going to be in somebody’s school that’s forming us into some kind of person. The question is not whether the school is bad or good, the question is, what is the learning? What’s the end? What’s the goal? What’s the purpose?

In my reading in the last several months, James K. A. Smith, he’s a professor of philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, he says this. He says, “And here, we must make an important distinction. We can distinguish good discipline from bad discipline by its ends.” So, the difference between the disciplines that form us into disciples of Christ and the disciples of contemporary culture that produce consumers is precisely the goal they are aiming at. Discipline and formation are good insofar as they are directed to the end that is proper to human beings. And the word tells us, our own catechism tells us, that our end, according to God’s will and purpose by His sanctification, is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. That is the ultimate purpose of God’s sanctification on us, our transforming. The ultimate end of our culture is to make us consumers.

He says, “But the church must also do this reality. It must give itself to enact countermeasures, counter formation, counter disciplines, that will form us into the kinds of people that God calls us to be.” Too often, we imagine that the goal of Christian discipleship is to train us to think the right way, to believe the right things. But the ultimate goal of sanctification and discipleship is to shape us into a certain kind of person, one who is like Jesus, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, loving God and neighbor, caring for the orphan and the widow and the stranger. These are all just translations of the broader human vocation, which is to bear the image of Christ as renewed image bearers of God. The primary aim of discipleship is to create a certain kind of person who acts in a certain way, not someone who simply thinks in a certain way.

And according to the Scriptures, knowing the truth is only instrumental to ultimately doing the truth. Let me repeat. That according to the Scriptures, knowing the truth is only instrumental in ultimately doing the truth. So, God’s purpose in His redemption, in this transformation, is to sanctify us, to form us into particular kinds of people, to walk in His particular ways, that we might glorify Christ and be more like Him. We are free from sin because we belong to another. The question is, do we belong to Him or do we belong to the culture? What is shaping us? What is shaping the way we think, how we respond, how we live, how we buy or spend or save? What is shaping our relationships? Is it the word? Is it that

which is well pleasing to Him? Are we giving ourselves to the counter formation, counter disciplinary practices of the word, worship, and prayer?

It isn't about just knowing something about God, or particular beliefs. It is the doing. And what's ironic is as we read God's word and we take it in – now, here, some of you may say, am I talking about quiet times? No, I'm not talking about quiet times. For some of you, like me, a daily discipline of a quiet time is really hard. So, I'll let you into the inner sanctum of what Pastor Lovelace does.

I don't always sit down with a word of Scripture and study it, word for word. Sometimes I do that. But most of the time, I take in large sections of Scripture. Sometimes I read it. Sometimes I hear it read to me. Sometimes I hear it read and I read it. And what's ironic is, thanks be to God, my ability and what's being formed in me is not contingent on being able to understand every word. The Spirit works through the word, which is why, in an argument which was my fault in raising my voice at one of the family members in my household, I had to go back the next day. And what began to work on my soul were two things. There was a part of me that grew up in a culture that was like, hey, I'm the dad. I say what goes on. This is how it works. It's my way or the highway. I feed you, or don't. And I'm like, it wasn't my fault. I got this together.

And then as I drove around that day, the words of Scripture, which I was taking in which happened to be a large swath of Proverbs which happened to be talking about the tongue, the Holy Spirit started going there. And then that day as I was driving home, I said to that person in my household: I just need to stop, and I need to tell you that the words which I chose last night with great passion were inappropriate. I don't apologize for the passion. I need to ask your forgiveness for the words.

It wasn't because I sat down at the beginning of that day studying all those Proverbs. It's what the Holy Spirit does when we just take it in. And what happens over time, God's people, as we take in God's word, whether it be particular verses or large sections, the Lord is faithful to His word. And His word does not return void. Meaning, it delivers what it promises. And I began to see as my own soul was marinating in the Proverbs, there was a part of me that said: I know some people who need to hear this. And then I had to look in the mirror, you know? And it was like, why? It's because I'm a man of many words, and I found myself in Proverbs 18, and it was like, "a fool goes about with many words." And I'm like, oh man. And I just began to receive it.

Now, that's letting you in. That's being transparent. Ladies and gentlemen, we live in a day where the word is more available to us than any generation before. We have apps galore, and they have ways of studying it. We have Bibles in every translation. We have songs. We have Bible up to our ears. But the question is, are we even marinating in it? Do we love it? Because to know what pleases God, that which is well pleasing to Him, does not happen separate from His word. It happens with it. And as we marinate in it, slowly but surely the counter disciplines, the counter formation begins to have its work. And we begin to think differently, and we act differently. And our feelings sometimes are slow to catch up, but they eventually do. God's purpose and our sanctification are one.

But finally, it is the glory of Christ. When he says, "this 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," this Jesus, this One, is echoed again in Zachariah 9 as he would take the One from the ground. This is a foreshadowing of even what Psalm 110 proclaims, that He will make a people who are His enemies, now they will become a footstool. He will be raised up. This is speaking of the Lord Jesus. And what we learn in this passage when it says, "by the blood of the eternal covenant," what he's referring to is this new covenant which surpasses the old covenant which means that this is a covenant which now establishes an atonement first and foremost which is eternal.

So, in some sense, we're to go back – because the writer of Hebrews does this – we're to go back and imagine, what were the people of God doing in Egypt? They were a people enslaved, ensnared. And God emancipated them, leading them out of Egypt through Moses. They were baptized going through the Red Sea. They went through, Moses struck the rock, they received the promise of God. He was given the

law. He became their shepherd. But he was not faithful till the end and he would not go into the promise land.

Jesus, as Hebrews has gone to great effort to show, is greater than Moses. And He was the shepherd who has led His people out of slavery to sin, emancipated us through redemption. But He, too, would come to an end which we would not expect. He would have to give of Himself, because it used to be the day of atonement, which is what Moses had to lead his people to do once a year to give an atoning sacrifice for their sins. That was the old covenant. Now, Jesus has gone with the blood of the eternal covenant on the cross as an atoning sacrifice once and forever to pay the debt of our sin. And then He was raised to life, resurrected. And as He gave of Himself, He went to the grave, He is resurrected, and now He is the great shepherd.

Isn't it interesting this is the first time resurrection appears in this sermon? And it is wedded with this idea of being the great shepherd. Jesus wasn't just resurrected to be victorious over sin and death. He was resurrected over sin and death as the great shepherd to lead a people whom God has redeemed to Himself that they might be formed into what is well pleasing to Him and are made disciples, followers of Christ that great shepherd. And as the word as told us, as the preacher of Hebrews has told us, we are being formed into His likeness. Jesus, forgiving, loving, faithful, holy, pure, righteous, glorious, eternal. This is who we are becoming. Every single superlative that could ever be attached to Jesus's name is what will one day be attached to us in perfect formation.

Now, we are a part of His restoration. But when Christ comes again, we will be made holy just as He is holy. We will be formed in His likeness. Just as He is glorious, so will we be. Jesus is that great shepherd whom we follow, whom we will be made into His likeness to the glory of the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant. Nothing can separate us from His love. No trial, no persecution, no suffering, no famine, no nakedness, nor power in heaven or on earth or under the earth can separate us from the love of God the Father in Christ Jesus. This is what He is doing. This is what He means to do in us to form us for the glory of Christ as our great shepherd. This is the good word. This is the good word.

And let me pronounce to you this. If there is ever something we the people of God can say amen to, it is this. This is the benediction. This is God's good word, His purpose, our sanctification for the glory of Christ. And all God's people said, amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God of peace and grace and power whose grace is greater than all our sin. For you have freed us from the dominion and power of sin through Jesus Christ our great shepherd whose blood has bought for us forgiveness and righteousness. And we, your children, are being formed into His likeness. O Lord, I ask that you would enable us to become more like Christ that which is well pleasing to you, that we might be a people who give ourselves to the word and worship and prayer. That we might be aware of our spiritual drifting and hear the call of your word by your grace coming again to you. May you keep us. May you form us. May your promise be our joy. And may we be a people of hope, in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.