

Finishing Touches

The Book of Hebrews

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Preached on: Sunday, November 8, 2020

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Our reading now is Hebrews 13 from verse 18 to verse 25, the end of the chapter.

18 Pray for us; for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably. 19 But I especially urge you to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. 20 Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. 22 And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. 23 Know that our brother Timothy has been set free, with whom I shall see you if he comes shortly. 24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. 25 Grace be with you all. Amen.

And we thank God for his word.

So this brings us to the final sermon in this series that started a fair way back in this wonderful epistle, the book of Hebrews. Well, we entitle this concluding sermon "Finishing Touches" and we can see that now the general moral teaching that was at the beginning of this chapter, chapter 13, that the writer has now concluded that, finished with that, and prior to that the main body of the argument has been completed. We notice it is an exhortation of but few words in verse 22, that there is so so much more that could have been said but this, the writer feels under inspiration, is sufficient to perhaps jolt these believers out of their slumber, out of their drift, and bring them into again an appreciation of the glory of Christ, his supremacy and his sufficiency for salvation.

We notice it's written from Rome, taking it such that there are those from Italy who greet the church. We imagine perhaps back in towards Jerusalem and those believers in Italy are mentioned in verse 24. Interesting, too, that Timothy is mentioned in verse 23 and he is known to so many of the churches and we note with interest that he has been set free. He's obviously been imprisoned and, in a way, we're encouraged to hear that he has stood the test. When we recall how Paul had had to urge him to be strong and just to quote in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a

sound mind." And the fact that Timothy perhaps has had to endure persecution shows that he's not given way to a spirit of fear but, as shown, what Paul there was saying, was the gift of God by his power, love and a sound mind. We now swear in that same epistle in 2 Timothy 2:1-3, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." And it looks like he has done just that and heard the words of the apostle and been willing to endure hardship, not given way to fear but been strong in the grace of God.

Well, the conclusion, then, brings us actually to some prayers and the need of prayer and what a fitting conclusion therefore it is. So my first heading: the need of prayer. The need of prayer. This is what the writer asks for for himself and it is something that he also prays for other people too. The need of prayer because prayer is not optional and it should never be thought of as the last resort, that all we're left with now is to pray. Well, that's the first thing we should do is to pray because we're absolutely dependent upon God. We all of us are weak, we all of us are needy people, and the writer, whoever it is, maybe the Apostle Paul that in keeping in the sense of what we know of him, that he asks, "Pray for us," in verse 18. "Pray for us."

You don't pray for preachers if you want to put it into a present-day context. It's often the fact that preachers have to endure all kinds of assaults on the mind, all kind of assaults on the body, and the spiritual warfare can be raging at its worst in and around them, troubles that they have to face, and this is where we find Paul will often be asking prayer of the church. Ephesians 6, for instance, and towards the end of that chapter, verse 18 and following, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints--and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." And we can see that this mighty man of God, has there been a man like him since, but that he asks the believers in Ephesus to pray for him that he may be able to preach, not give way himself to fear, that he may be bold "to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains."

It's not the only instance of him requesting prayer of the church and in Romans 15, for instance, verses 30-33, we find him again urging the church and pleading with the church, in fact, to pray for him. "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen." Well, again that is his desire there and to seeing perhaps difficulties ahead and rightly so in respect of what kind of reception that he would get in Judea and in Jerusalem, and how not only amongst the unbelievers but in amongst the saints in Jerusalem who we know some of them perhaps were a little worried about the way that

Paul mixed with the Gentiles and he prays furthermore that he may be able to come to the people in Rome and be able to be refreshed together with them.

And then a further instance of it in Colossians 4:2-3, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains." So he is praying for opportunities to preach the word of God, that a door for the word would be opened and he may be able to speak the mystery of Christ, what God has revealed about his Son.

For preachers, apostles here but let's take it in a more modern context, preachers, pastors and elders, church officers, well, they're not just robotic, they're not automations, they are not just a bundle of whatever they are and given robust constitutions and everything else, that they just coast through life somehow. Well, no, far from it and so the request is there to pray, pray for preachers, not only this preacher but all preachers for they need courage. That's what Paul's praying for, isn't it? We are to preach boldly. They need courage. That at times can be a very intimidating place to be in a pulpit, or out on the streets, or wherever else, and so power is needed to overcome cowardice, overcome fear, to be those ambassadors who open their mouth and speak as they ought to speak.

They have a need of love. A need of love, continuing love. Sometimes preachers, pastors, have to endure some unlovely behavior in return and prevail when they're tired perhaps or bruised or a little hurt. And how they need wisdom in this day and this age where COVID-19 continues to put before us all kinds of complex issues and decisions that need to be made day by day. Wisdom. Discernment. And there are a host of other issues where likewise wisdom and discernment are needed, and beyond that desire, a desire to continue in the ministry.

1 Peter 5:1-2, "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly." And so Peter writes, himself an apostle, but here now he speaks as a fellow elder, as one who exercises responsibility in the church and encourages them, "Shepherd the flock of God not by compulsion but willingly," that you would have that desire, that you would still have that desire to keep on preaching, keep on pastoring. And well, it can be the fact and people talk, don't they, about burn-out and that can happen in any particular profession or calling or in any particular walk of life, that we end up exhausted and jaded and unable to bring any enthusiasm or desire or willingness to that work and Peter seems to anticipate that among perhaps the elders that he's writing to there. So we pray, don't we, there for pastors, preachers, elders, that that desire will continue to be there to do that work.

Well, he also speaks about the fact that we're confident that we have a good conscience and all things desiring to live honorably. Well, that's a valuable thing and it is as though without that there would be a hindrance to the answering of these prayers that he's soliciting. He's asking for himself, that were there to be some issue that was outstanding

between him and God, between him and somebody else, that that would actually be a hindrance to those prayers being answered. And so it is, well, it's for all of us, isn't it, here that pastors, preachers, or everybody else to have a good conscience in all things in terms of private life, public life, thought life, all the things that make up what we are and what we do. It's a work in progress. There's always work to be done, things to be put right, progress that needs to be made but we look for that conscience void of offense.

Again in Romans 12 on this occasion, we can see the importance again of these things in verses 17 and 18, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." Well, that's what we aim for, isn't it, not repaying anyone evil for evil and not by what we do, what we think, what we spend our time on, making ourselves perhaps questionable in the sight of people and aiming always to live peaceably as far as it depends on us. We can't make the people always live peaceably towards us but we try again to have a conscience void of offense otherwise these could be a block not only in the blessings that a preacher may receive but which any of us may receive, and so we're always looking to have a good conscience to be able to answer for our actions and have a credible and good reason for the things we do and the things that we say and the things that we think.

And we notice this, people say, don't they, prayer works. Well, it sure does because God works. God is not idle. God does not sleep. And here the writer in verse 19 especially urges people to pray, "that I may be restored to you the sooner." Whatever may be the situation, perhaps he's been detained, maybe faced some difficulties himself from the authorities, and he is praying that the churches will pray for him, "that I may be restored to you the sooner," because he believes that if people pray, it will make a difference. Things happen when we pray.

There is a mystery, isn't there, of God's sovereignty and the various ways in which that interacts with us as human beings with our very very slender grasp often of the facts of a situation, and yet God delights to answer prayer. He invites us to pray, requires us, commands us to pray, and not is that an idle word but that things may happen the sooner, that there will be something more rapid happening were we to pray. Because God is living, God is active, God is powerful, God is supernatural, so things can happen where we never thought things could happen because he's supernatural. So we recall that. He has power, he has sympathy, and that lined together, those things there are mighty mighty aspects of God's character.

So we pray not aiming at eloquence, not looking to pray as long as we can to measure the length of our prayers, but to bring our hearts and our soul into it; earnestness, the desire that is very vehement, very strong to bring that into our prayers. So the need of prayer. The writer describes his own need of prayer. Gifted man though he is and all the insights he has into the Old Testament and the law and how to apply that and all the rigor and the logic he shows in the argument that he deploys, that he needs the prayer of the saints and he urges them to pray for him.

Well, the second heading is this: the prayers God answers, and here particularly we're looking at verses 20 to 21, "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." Well, that is a mighty prayer and it has within it there the whole aspect of authority, that this is a prayer that God will answer. Not a vague hope. Not just hoping that this great God of peace who brings peace to the soul, that sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ brought back from the dead through the blood of the everlasting covenant, the Shepherd of the sheep, not just a vague hope that he might do something for us but praying in the sure knowledge that this is the will of God, making you complete in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well pleasing in his sight.

This is the sort of prayer God will answer because it's a prayer for sanctification and sanctification is always according to the will of God. He wants for his people to be holy, supremely, that we, as his people, will be sanctified holy people. And that sanctification is the will of God for us, and the will of God for us is that we will do the will of God, plain and simple as that. He is the God of peace, we mentioned that. He is the one that reconciles people to himself through Jesus Christ. It's a backward glance really at the insufficiency, the sacrifice of animals under the old covenant, and now we've moved on and God is placated, his anger pacified, he is reconciled to us. And we have to eye Jesus Christ, isn't it, at the center of everything which he's been at the center of this book, hasn't he, right from chapter 1 and all the way through, all the aspects of his ministry that undergird his entitlements to be the only one that we trust for our salvation. He who was raised up, gloriously resurrected, the one who is alive forevermore, the true high priest at the right hand of God who is making intercession for his people, and all of it based on his shed blood. The gratification of that everlasting covenant, that new covenant, and which itself is based on the eternal councils made there in eternity past, the council of God for our salvation.

So that blood that was shed guarantee, then, that he be raised from the dead, that he would become the Shepherd of his people, looking after us, his people, guiding us and guarding us as is good for us. So that ministry of his means that everything else follows from it and he is able to bless us with his Holy Spirit to indeed make us holy. God works through his Son. He is the one, through Jesus Christ to whom we glory forever and ever. This work of making us complete in every good work to do his will coming to us through our great high priest.

And what a thing it is that he does and in these few words here, why there's a lifetime, isn't there, of work and activity in the Holy Spirit, that as he works through his Son by his Spirit he's making us obedient to conform to his will. He's doing things within us that we, in turn, will carry out actions, that there will be things that we involve ourselves in, and responses that we make to provocations perhaps that are according then to his will. He makes us delight in the inner man. He causes us there to receive his truth and love those things which we have. It's a work of recreation, a work of renewal, a work of conforming us and bringing us in our thought life and everywhere else, every part of us to desire to

overthrow sin and to desire holiness, that our minds, our wills, will be just permeated with the desire for obedience to the revealed will of God.

We can see this work that is his work. Interesting, who can understand it? The part that we play, the part that God plays, but we put the emphasis on the part that he plays in all these things but as Philippians 2 puts it and expresses it in a way which sums it all up. Verses 12 and 13 of the second chapter of Philippians, Paul writes this, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now 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 do for His good pleasure." So it places us there in the situation of working at our own salvation with fear and trembling. We do it with a sense of our own need and our desires there before God but then we learn that actually it's God who works in us both to will and to do for his good pleasure. There is the mystery of how our prayers are answered, how we have to do things, we have to be moved in our own spirits, we have to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, but then ultimately it's God who is at work so that we would will to do those things and then we'd actually do those things that he has placed in our hearts.

There's a host of things which are there and in Ephesians 3:20-21, another of these great prayers, "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." Well, there is God who is at work in us. This is the way in which we pray and he is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think because he's God, supernatural, all-powerful and that power is working in us and that is to bring glory to him in the church to all generations forever and ever.

Again, we just note in passing Philippians 1:9-11, another of these prayers, prayers that are answered, prayers that are according to the will of God. It says there in Philippians 1 reading from verse 9, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." So these are the things that God would build within us where we always know we're on safe ground to ask for these things, that we may love people more, that that may abound, that we'd have knowledge and discernment and approve the things that are excellent and what is the will of God and will those things ourselves sincerely and without offense to the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness.

So it things, in a way, as we know the character of God, in that sense quite predictable, aren't they? Well, he would desire those things in us. Not that we should be receiving great rewards in terms of wealth of that every desire we have for healing should just automatically be answered, but God would have his people to be holy, that we would be completed inside, completed in doing the good works that he would have us do while at the same time he's working in us to do those very things. Well, in all of it, it's not a noiseless or a painless operation, that his working in us isn't something that is just a

sweet, gentle process but at times a process that is extraordinarily painful. There's repentance. There's being humbled. They are all the ways in which revise every downwards our own estimate of ourselves, who we are, what we might be in the purposes of God. All those interests that we protect, all those unresolved battles which still are raging somewhere in the soul and where God as he works in us what is well pleasing in his sight would begin to work upon in order then that we're freed from them and are then at liberty to do the will of God that we might be more righteous, more godly, more holy, and even more joyful and to bear those things which he has placed upon us with a greater sense of contentment through this life.

Well, these are indeed great prayers that we find not only here in Hebrews 13 but throughout as we've been seeing other epistles in the New Testament, prayers we can pray for ourselves, prayers we can pray for other people with the sure knowledge that this is the will of God and that it may, in turn, by his deeper working within us become our will too, that we're molded and that we're shaped to do those things more instinctively. We often say, don't we, more instinctively, more readily without resistance, without friction, without us having to do all the wrong things first before we do the right thing. And so these are prayers perhaps we ought to pray all the more for ourselves.

So there the writer brings this to a conclusion and passes on his greetings there, "Grace be with you all. Amen." A typical conclusion in these epistles. Grace, that God would be at work in them, that he would be bringing spiritual grace, spiritual light into their hearts. Well, may he bring spiritual truth and spiritual light into our hearts. May we take seriously the central message of this great epistle that it is in the end pure and simply, it is in the end that the Lord Jesus Christ whom we indeed should hold in the highest esteem, to whom we attribute everything in our salvation, and we say that all things are through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever. And to that we would all add our solemn yet joyful amen.

FINISHING TOUCHES

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Hebrews 13: 18 –25.

The moral teaching that formed the basis of the first part of this chapter has now been completed. The main argument proving the supremacy of Christ is also finished. Having spoken about elders in churches, the writer now shares some more personal details and asks for prayer for himself, among other things. We note that this exhortation is just brief (v22). There was much more that could be said. He also sends greetings from those who are from Italy which suggests that this is being written from Rome (v24). Timothy is mentioned as someone known to the people, probably, in Jerusalem. We learn that Timothy has been released which suggests that he has endured persecution for the gospel's sake. We can perhaps see from this that Timothy has heeded Paul's encouragements to him (see 2 Timothy 1:8; and 2:1-3).

1. The need of prayer.

Prayer is not an optional extra or something we do as a last resort. It should be our first thought and is a proper recognition of the fact that we are a needy people. He requests that those he is writing to should pray for him. Despite his great insights into the truths of God's word, he nevertheless recognizes his need of help from the Lord and asks for prayer. Preachers need the help of the Lord's people in prayer. They are at the centre of spiritual warfare and suffer assaults on their bodies and on their minds. Paul solicits prayer from the people that he writes to (See Romans 15:30-33; Ephesians 6:18-20; and Colossians 4:2-3). Preachers are not robots but flesh and blood, and are subject to frailty.

Some of their particular needs are for courage. Preaching brings preachers into conflict with people and they need the Lord's help to overcome fears and cowardice. They also have a need of love. They have to prevail despite some unlovely behaviour. They have to overcome tiredness and discouragement. They need wisdom and discernment as there are many complex and often unexpected issues that they are called upon to confront and make decisions on. They also need desire and willingness to continue in the work. In 1 Peter 5:1-3 it mentions willingness to do the work. Sometimes this can be missing and ministers can suffer from burn-out.

They need to be able to work with a clear conscience, living honourably. Romans 12:17-18 speaks about the importance of living at peace with people, having a good reputation with outsiders. We need to have a conscience that is void of offence. This is not to say

that there are not things that ministers need to put right in relationships and the like. The writer suggests that failing to have a clear conscience can be a block to the Lord answering prayer.

From this, however, we can see that the writer believes prayer works, and it works because God is at work. He is a living and powerful God, intervening and supremely supernatural. So we are encouraged to pray to Him, not with eloquence or lengthy prayers, but with sincerity and with heart and soul.

2. The prayers God answers

We can find a prayer in vv 20-21. This is not something that the writer includes with a vague hope that the Lord will answer it. This is the kind of prayer that the Lord will answer. It is a prayer that people would be made complete in the will of God and so it is a prayer that is in the will of God to answer. For this is our sanctification, to do the will of God.

We find, in this prayer, that the prayer directs our attention to the fact that God is a God of peace. We are reconciled to Him through our Lord Jesus Christ. He is therefore at peace with us, and therefore kindly disposed to hear us and to answer our prayers. He is reconciled to us through our Lord Jesus Christ, the great subject of this mighty letter. He has been raised up because He was willing to shed His blood for His people as part of what He engaged to do, with His Father, in eternity past. His blood has ratified that covenant and made all its benefits flow to His people, including the grace of answered prayer. God works through His Son to make us obedient and to conform us to the will of God. This will make our outward actions, our inner dispositions and our responses holy. This will make us delight in the inner man to do the law of God. It will mean that our mind and will are permeated with godly desires.

It is a mysterious process how the Lord works upon us to do according to His good pleasure. We have to take steps and make choices, working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12-13). But underlying it all is God, who is at work in us and that is where the emphasis needs to be. We can see further prayers that the Lord would work in His people and give them needed grace (Philippians 1:9-11; and Ephesians 3:20-21). The answering of these prayers in the life of the believer is not a noiseless and painless operation. It will involve the believer exploring his or her deepest desires, unearthing protected interests and facing unresolved battles. But it is a great work that the Lord is about to make us like His Son, who is the glorious main theme of this entire book.