

Final Requests and Blessings

Read: Hebrews 13.17-25.

Already they have been reminded of their leaders who have died for their faith. Their present leaders are to be obeyed. Their watchful work and their responsibility before God are to be recognised.

And don't forget to pray for us! While it isn't clear what the relationship is between the author and his readers, it would appear that he has some sort of leadership role himself. His call for prayer for himself reminds us of a similar call by Paul in Eph. 6.19-20. All who are in Christian leadership need constant prayer.

- In what ways can we give greater support and encouragement to our Christian leadership?
- Reflect on the benediction in vv. 20-21. Then say it together as a prayer of blessing for one another: **“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”**



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

10. The Eternal Christ

Reading: Hebrews 13

There are choices we make that are temporary, just for the moment. Styles and fashions of clothing have changed greatly over the years. Shapes and designs of motor cars have been modified. Asian cuisine is more to our palate than it was a few years ago. Fortunes of political parties have risen and fallen. Some leaders have impressed us. Others have distressed us.

Time was when terms like “marginalised” and “ecology” hadn't been brought into usage. We had no concept of “political correctness” to taunt and haunt us. We probably tended to conform to societal norms, but didn't think of that as “peer pressure.”

Times have changed. A superficial shift became a fundamental drift – away from faith in the God of the Bible, away from conventional morality, away from the sure and dependable... and into “liberation” and the uncertain and temporary.

- Comment on this assessment of the age in which we live. To what extent are our lives influenced by peer pressure and political correctness?

Yesterday, Today, Forever

Read: Hebrews 13.1-8.

“The Epistle is finished; all the reasons for perseverance in the faith have been developed. Before concluding with the usual greetings, the author adds a postscript where he enumerates quickly and without logical order several practical rules concerning the manner of life (lives v. 5, way of life v. 7) in the social (vv. 1-6, 17) and religious (vv. 7-16, 18-19) order, and which would be appropriate, for the most part, to any Christian community: brotherly love (vv. 1-3, 16), marriage and chastity (v. 4), unselfishness and confidence in God (vv. 5-6), faithfulness, respect and obedience towards the leaders of the community (vv. 7, 17), vigilance in the faith and breaking with the synagogue (vv. 8-15)” (C Spicq).

This section begins, “Let brotherly love (Gk. *philadelphia*) continue” (literally, v. 1). This includes their willingness to stand alongside those who were suffering persecution (v. 3). We recall that special sense of loving family responsibility expressed in the early church (Acts 4.32-37). That love is to reach out beyond the Christian “in-group” to strangers (v. 2).

Marriage is to be held in honour among the whole Christian community and couples are to live together in faithfulness (literally, “the bed undefiled, pure” v. 4). The need for sexual purity was highlighted in the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 15.19), in the letter from the first Christian council (Acts 15.29), in Paul’s teaching about the decadence of society and God’s expectations of his people (Rom. 1.24, 13.13, and elsewhere), and in the judgment of God (Rev. 9.20-21).

Don’t become ensnared by “the love of money” – literally, “[Have] the not-loving-money attitude and way of life.” There’s a whole advertising industry dedicated to make us discontent with what we have! Remember, these people had accepted confiscation of their property for the sake of Christ (10.34). The Christian is to live constantly trusting God.

“Remember your leaders” – this may be a reference to leaders who have died in the persecution. They have followed in the faithful tradition of the people of old and have now gone to the Lord – imitate their faith (v. 7).

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (v. 8). This is a key statement which sums up the major theme of the epistle. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses... even some of our Christian leaders... have all passed on, BUT the Jesus Christ to whom they looked forward in faith or in whom they put their trust is “the same yesterday and today and forever.”

- “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Reflect on the eternal relevance of Christ – for Abraham, for the apostolic age, for us today and for ever. How does the average non-Christian view Christ today? How can we communicate the relevance of Christ to our generation?

True Sacrifices

Read: Hebrews 13.9-16.

It is the eternal relevance of Christ – “the same yesterday and today and forever” – that is crucial as the author now goes on to say, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings” (v. 9).

“The language here suggests something more than relapsing into orthodox Judaism; it reminds us of Paul’s appeal to the Colossian Christians not to let anyone sit in judgment on them in respect of food or drink, because things like these disappeared in the very act of being used; regulations and prohibitions regarding such evanescent things provided no spiritual support or defence... Our author makes the same point. It is by divine grace, not by rules about food, that the heart – that is to say, the spiritual life – is nourished; rules about food, imposed by external authority, have never helped people to maintain a closer walk with God” (FF Bruce).

“We have an altar...” (v. 10). The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement wasn’t eaten. The bodies of the bull and goat were to be taken outside the camp where their hides, flesh and offal were to be burned up (Lev. 16.27). There were other sin-offerings in which the flesh was eaten by the priests in the sanctuary (Lev. 10.16-18). But “we have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.” The blood of Jesus has been offered in the heavenly sanctuary and “is permanently available as the source of their spiritual nourishment and refreshment, as they feed on him in their hearts by faith” (FF Bruce).

But there is another reference here. Jesus suffered “outside the city gate” – “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (vv. 13-14).

“Jesus was led outside Jerusalem to be crucified, and this is regarded as a token of his rejection by all that Jerusalem represented. To have his messianic claims rejected by the leaders of the people was in itself a stigma; to be cast out and crucified added to that stigma. But, as Moses in his day ‘considered the stigma that rests on God’s Anointed greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt’ (11.26, NEB), so the call came now to the people of Christ to consider that same stigma greater wealth than anything they could hope to gain by declining to burn their boats and commit themselves unreservedly to him” (FF Bruce).

The atoning sacrifice is complete – once-for-all – but we are called to offer the sacrifices of praise and of kind and loving action (vv. 15-16).

“Christianity is sacrificial through and through; it is founded on the one self-offering of Christ, and the offering of his people’s praise and property, of their service and their lives, is caught up into the perfection of his acceptable sacrifice, and is accepted in him” (FF Bruce).

- In what ways is our life as Christians meant to be “outside the camp”? To what extent are we tempted to make the church a new “camp” instead of living as pilgrims and strangers in the world?
- Reflect on verses 15 and 16. What sacrifices are involved in practice for those who have accepted the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ?