
Day 359 – December 25

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter to the Hebrews

Readings: *Hebrews 10:19-13:25*

Reflections:

- Exhortation to continue faith in Christ – Proper response to access: Here we see a mix of images. Like the curtain that was torn in the temple at Christ's death (see Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) Christ's body was torn and it spiritually opened a way for us to enter into an intimate relationship with God. We can all now be like Moses who talks face to face with God as someone talks with their friend (Exodus 33:11). Now that the way is open, we should all make use of it and actually draw near to have intimate friendship with God! It is the inside out transformation that gives us this confidence. The writer starts on the inside (sincere heart assured by our faith, clear and forgiven conscience) and works its way to the outside with a transformation of our lifestyle (washed body - symbolized by baptism). Our hope is in Christ's faithfulness, not in our merit or faithfulness. Love in community now flows from this inside out transformation and a key part of that is consistently hanging out together in community. We see in this passage the progression of faith, hope and love. This may suggest Paul's influence in the writer's teaching or the widespread use of these teachings within the early Jesus movement. The "Day" is a reference to the return of Christ. Again it appears they thought it would happen in their lifetime.
- Consequences of rejection: We see another very stern warning for those who enter into relationship with Christ, experience the Spirit and then willfully turn away and openly reject Christ. Again, this is not a warning with someone struggling with real doubts or to live a consistently surrendered life. This is for someone who has willfully chosen to become a mocking and self-centered enemy of God. Interestingly in this passage the community is warned to let God deal with these people. Again we are called to enemy love. We can trust God to sort out what judgment looks like. We should just focus on loving people and not judging them. We though should be warned about treating God lightly. God is not Santa Claus who just has a naughty and nice list that in the end really means nothing. He is the God of perfect power, righteousness, love, mercy, and truth. He alone is worthy of our complete surrender and worship. He alone should be honored and served. He alone will judge and divide humanity according to our hearts.

- Strength in persecution: The writer reminds the listeners of a time when they were more heavily persecuted and more clearly trusting in Christ for all their needs as they looked forward to a better home in the next life.
- Need for strength in faith: Habakkuk 2:4 is a key passage from the Hebrew Scriptures that is quoted in two of Paul's key writings, Romans (1:17) and Galatians (3:11). Again we see the close connections with the teachings of Paul.
- Examples of great faith – Assurance and hope: This section of Hebrews has been called the Hall of Faith. It opens with a simple definition of faith: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith is having enough confidence in God's love, character and faithfulness to us that we are willing to wait (sometimes just barely) for him to fulfill a promise he has made to us. It may be a general promise we have received in Christ or it may be a personal promise we have received through something the Spirit has told us. In any case, we know that God has spoken and then the challenge is to live our lives in line with that word or truth and wait for God to make it true or bring it about. The writer now starts to walk through many of the well known stories of Israel.
- Faith of the patriarchs: The main verse here is, "anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." This is the starting point of faith. Unless you believe God exists and really seek him with all your heart, you will get nowhere with experiencing God in your life. We should also note how consistently a life of faith appears to look completely dumb or ridiculous to those looking on.
- Faith of Abraham: In reviewing Abraham's story, the writer points to living like a stranger in the world as we await God's revelation of his ultimate community in the new earth. "By faith he made his own in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country...for he was looking forward to the city with foundation (not living in temporal tents), whose architect and builder is God.
- Faith in unseen country: Now we must face a sobering reality when we trust an eternal God. Not all promises are fulfilled in this life time. "All of these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance." God does fulfill his promises. Some in this life and some in the next. We can trust him regardless. We also see in this passage a very clear teaching regarding Christ-followers living as strangers and aliens within their own context as we seek to live as citizens of Christ's kingdom (1 Peter 2:11).
- Abraham's faith: Abraham also had a kind of faith in the resurrection, trusting that God can make dead things come alive. This is important for those facing their own death.
- Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph: All of these patriarchs looked forward to future beyond their own lives.
- Faith of Moses: Moses as well in faith looked forward to future rewards rather than getting distracted by the rewards of this life, symbolized in the wealth of Egypt.

- Faith of Israelites: More stories of living a crazy life of obedience and God's salvation for those that trust him this way.
- Judges, Kings and Prophets: Here we see a key passage that is often missed or not fully understood because it is not properly divided in the translations. The first half is about all the success stories in Israel where "weakness was turned to strength" and people experienced success in this life. The final statement suggests that women even received their dead back to life again (1 Kings 17 – is probably only the clear story of this happening in the story of Israel). The Greek now transitions with a simple word, "Others..." This next group is describing what the first Christ-followers experienced as they suffered and died for their faith in Jesus: jeers, flogging, stoning, imprisonment, killed by the sword, and sawed in two. Most Christians today have little concept of this kind of torture and suffering.
- Faith's reward in Christ: It is this group that did not receive the promised salvation in this life. They died in tremendous pain still looking forward to God's salvation through Christ. Why would God do this? In God's plan, both kinds of living by faith are a part of us growing as individuals and as his people into a complete and mature trust relationship with him.
- A call for steadfast faith – Example demands perseverance: As we come to the conclusion of the sermon the writer paints a picture from the Greek Olympic Games. The image is of those who died before us and were faithful to God cheering from the stands as we run our race. Our eyes are fixed on Jesus but we can hear the cheers and encouragement of women and men who have gone before us and set an example for us to follow. So we must not give up just as a marathon runner must keep pushing through the pain until they reach their goal.
- Struggles are discipline: The reality is that these early Christ-followers faced death and torture. Proverbs 3:11-12 is quoted to remind us that God can use our suffering to draw us closer to Christ and develop our character through dependence on him. We shouldn't see this suffering as coming from God but rather how God can even take the worst circumstances and use it to draw us closer to Him.
- Discipline shows sonship: God is perfecting our spirits to be like Christ and like him. He is the father of our spirits. Therefore as we draw near to God in our pain, he will meet us there and transform that painful experience into a place of intimacy as Christ suffers with us. This kind of discipline may seem cruel but we shouldn't see it this way. It is more like soldiers going through battle together and the commander encouraging them to draw strength from each other as they push through the fear and pain to accomplish the mission they have been called to.
- Faith requires holy lives: In our struggles and pain, we are also encouraged to carefully guard our relationships and dedication to remaining faithful to Christ. Sometimes when we experience tough times we think that we somehow deserve slacking off spiritually. One moment of selfish indulgence can have lasting consequences. Our own journey of faith can create a level path for others to follow in and experience God's grace and healing. We need

to guard against bitterness when we are suffering. All of these are very practical and helpful reminders for those who struggle with suffering.

- Judgment under law: We are reminded about that religion did nothing to restore Israel to relationship with God. In fact, it reinforced the fear and terror of God's power and perfection.
- Greater covenant: Through Christ we are welcomed into an eternal community of life and celebration where people are changed from the inside out so that they might live together forever.
- God to be worshipped with awe: What is the conclusion of this sermon? Listen to God. His word can't be shaken. "Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire." Our intimacy with God does not diminish our deep respect and awe of him, it heightens it! God alone is worthy of all we have and all we are!
- Various Exhortations – Love even strangers: This paragraph opens a whole new part of Hebrews. It reads like a separate letter, possibly a introductory or concluding letter that accompanied the sermon. It is also possible that Paul or one of his associates wrote this letter (note: the final phrase "Grace be with you all" in various forms is virtually universal as the closing line in Paul's letters) and it was added to the end of the sermon that was written by another respected leader. In this opening paragraph, we see a possible mistranslation in the English. The Greek word can be translated either as "angels" or as "messengers". Therefore it may better read, "Do not forget to entertain strangers for by so doing some people have entertained messengers (of Christ) without knowing it." Due to persecution, people would not quickly indicate that they were travelling teachers or preachers for Jesus. Yet they would still be looking for a place to stay when entering a new town. By Christ-followers welcoming in strangers to their guest rooms (a common thing) they would at times find out afterwards that they had welcomed in messengers for Jesus (see notes on 1 Timothy 3:16).
- Maintain sexual purity: The listeners are reminded of the high sexual ethic of Jesus and the warning against having sex with people outside of covenant.
- Do not trust wealth: We see an association between the love of money and fear. One of the primary ways we try to save ourselves is through having money and seeking to be financially secure. As we trust in Christ, we no longer have to view money or possessions as something we collect but rather things we can give away to help others. The verses quoted are Deuteronomy 31:6 and Psalm 118:6-7. A literal translation of the Greek would read, "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever will I leave you; Never, ever, ever, ever, ever will I forsake you." There are five negatives with each verse to underscore how completely and utterly God is committed to being right with us at our side.
- Imitate lives of leaders: The key to servant leadership is not what you teach but how you live.

- Avoid demeaning teachings: Here we see another bit of irreligious teaching. Jesus and his irreligious message never changes. Our strength is in grace not in following rituals, even Torah rituals.
- Leave world systems for Christ: We are called to identify with the suffering and humility of Jesus and his death, realizing that we suffer outside of the systems and security of the cities of this world as we as strangers and aliens look forward to our true city. The Jewish people looked to Jerusalem as a symbol of their ultimate home of peace and security. As Christ-followers, our redemption and our hope both lie outside of this city or any earthly city.
- Offer sacrifices of praise: See Romans 12:1-3 as a parallel text. We no longer offer religious rituals as worship but rather our lives of love and service to God.
- Submit to church leaders: This is a common theme of both Jesus (Matthew 23:1-4) and Paul (Romans 13:1-7) even when the leaders are religious or governmental. We are called to live lives of submission, especially with those who serve us as spiritual leaders within the church.
- Closing thoughts – request for prayers: See Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1. We see here the interdependence and mutual support shared through prayer for each other.
- Prayer for recipients: This closing prayer reflects another brief summary of themes expressed in the sermon. Interestingly, the focus of Jesus in this prayer shifts off of Jesus being the High Priest to being our shepherd. The final parting thought emphasizes our close and personal relationship with Jesus as our own shepherd or pastor and his role to move us into to other-centered service.
- Final thoughts: The “word of exhortation” is most likely the sermon and the short letter is this final chapter of Hebrews. The writer notes that Timothy has been released. We have no other record of Timothy being in prison but this might suggest that writer of this concluding section is either Paul or a leader connected with Paul in light of the close association with Timothy. The reference to Italy suggests that this was written in connection with the Roman church. As mentioned, “Grace be with you all” was consistently used at the end of Paul’s letters which adds strength to the suggestion that Paul or one of his close associates wrote this concluding letter.