

Final Exhortations

A study of Hebrews 13:7-25

By Michael Morrison

As the author of Hebrews nears the end of his letter, he encourages the readers to be faithful to Christ. He also gives us hints about the situation the readers are in.

Avoid strange teachings

He begins by exhorting the readers to “remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (v. 7). This implies that the leaders who began the church were faithful until they died. They were exemplary in many ways, but their faith was especially noteworthy.

He switches to another topic in the next verse: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” This refers to his character and teachings, not his physical appearance. Since his significance does not change, the author exhorts: “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings” (v. 9).

As far as we can tell from previous chapters, the readers had no question about Jesus being the Son of God, now in heaven. But they seemed to need some convincing that Jesus had taken care of their sins.

Jewish neighbors were pressuring them to look to the old covenant for atonement, perhaps saying that they would be more faithful to God if they participated in the meals that were part of synagogue life in the first century.

So the author responds: “It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by the eating of ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who observe such rituals.” He is concerned about spiritual health, not physical health. Our hearts are put right with God by grace, not by rituals.

“We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat” (v. 10). Here, “altar” is a metaphor for a place of atonement. In Jesus, we have a source of forgiveness that is unavailable to people who rely on old covenant methods of worship.

Accepting disgrace

The author notes a final similarity between the old covenant sacrificial system and Jesus. On the annual Day of Atonement, “the high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp” (v. 11; Lev. 16:14, 27). Similarly, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (Heb. 13:12; John 19:20).

Since Jesus died for us outside of Jerusalem, the author urges: “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (v. 13). “Camp” is a metaphor for Judaism; the readers should leave Judaism behind and accept the social consequences of following Jesus.

Why should we be willing to accept disgrace? “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (v. 14). This refers to Heb. 11:10—Abraham looked for a future city, one built by God. Since our hope is in the world to come, we look to Jesus and not to public opinion for approval.

How do we worship without old covenant sacrifices? “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16). We worship God when we publicly confess our faith in Jesus, and when we do good to others,

for that is what God wants us to do.

The author closes this paragraph with another reference to leaders: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you” (v. 17).

Authority can be misused, and this verse does not mean that people should submit to unbiblical or selfish commands. However, church leaders do have the responsibility to “keep watch over” people, to be concerned about their spiritual health. If they lead the people well, it will be of great benefit, but if members continually resist authority, they will miss out.

Personal requests

The letter ends, as many Greek letters did, with personal comments from the author: “Pray for us,” he asks (v. 18).

“I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon” (v. 19). The word restored indicates that the author was once part of the congregation. He wants to return, but is detained in some way.

He adds his own prayer for the readers: “Now 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” (vv. 20-21).

He adds another plea: “I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly” (v. 22). The sermon could have been much longer, but the author has been as brief as possible.

He closes in vv. 24-25: “Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.” We do not know whether he was writing from Italy, or to Italy.

When the author says “all” your leaders, and “all” the people, this suggests that the readers were in a city that had several congregations.

Yet the letter was written only to this one, probably because it had the people with the pressures and doctrinal questions implied in the letter. It may have been a Jewish congregation surrounded by Gentile congregations.

No matter who and where the original readers were, the message of this epistle is clear: Jesus is our High Priest, who gave himself so that our sins might be forgiven, and he brought the only effective way for us to worship God.

Instead of looking to the old covenant, we should look to Jesus, be faithful to Jesus, and trust in him to bring us to eternal joy with the people of God.

Questions for discussion

- What “strange teachings” carry people away from Christ today? (v. 9)
- Does grace strengthen my heart, or make me less diligent? (v. 10)
- Did I leave a “camp” in order to come to Christ? (v. 13) What kind of camp or social group do others leave?
- Do I respond to leaders with respect, or skepticism? (v. 17)

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