

Hebrews 13:20-25

“Safe With the Great Shepherd”

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Ordinary Time

The New Testament epistles were received by their original readers in a far different manner than we typically experience them today. Many of the early Christians would have been illiterate, and essentially none of them would have had their own personal copies of the apostolic letters they received.

Rather, these early Christians were meant to receive these letters orally, they were intended to be read to them out loud —often the whole letter in one sitting— in the context of gathered Lord’s Day worship, as they came together to hear the Word of God.

Unfortunately, we don’t really ever experience the New Testament this way. Now, there’s nothing wrong with the way we slowly preach through these letters, section by section, verse by verse, but it is, in my mind, a loss that we don’t ever have an opportunity to hear these letters as they were first meant to heard.

And so, this morning, as we close our sermon series on Hebrews, we’re going to spend the bulk of our time hearing the letter to the Hebrews as it would have been originally received by those to whom it was written. The epistle is too long for me to read it to you in its entirety, but I’ve worked to create a coherent series of excerpts of the letter - including sections from each one of its 13 chapters, that will hopefully put before you a whole sense of the epistle.

And then, at the end, I’ll make some brief comments on the last section of the letter - Hebrews 13:20-25.

It's worth remembering, as you listen now to God's word preached to you verbatim this morning, that most scholars agree that Hebrews was almost certainly first a sermon that was subsequently turned into a circular letter — and thus it's particularly appropriate for us to experience it in this way.

It is, without a doubt, one of the greatest sermons ever written or preached.

*Let's pray...Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.

That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers, saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

For surely it is not angels that Jesus helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted....

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

Therefore, while the promise of entering God’s rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need....

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you”;

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although Jesus was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek....

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity...And this we will do if God permits...Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.

For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you."

And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

And we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek...and this makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever....

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we *have* such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man...

For when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance...For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Indeed, Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near....

Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

For we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls...

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks...

And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city....

And what more shall I say?

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword.

They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated — of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect...

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

For we have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them...

But we have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel....

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire....

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

And 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.

I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you.

*Thus far the reading of God's holy and inerrant word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.*

At the end of his remarkable letter, the Apostle gives his readers a gift. He gives them a blessing.

In the midst of their sin and doubt, in the midst of their weariness and confusion, the Apostle tells them this: Beloved, you are safe with Jesus.

Jesus, he emphasizes in this last portion of his letter, is not only the one who has become incarnate and has won your salvation through his death and resurrection at some point in history past.

No, this Jesus, the Apostle says, is the one whom the God of peace brought again from the dead so that he might be — today, in the here and now — your great shepherd.

Beloved, do you know this? Do you know that you have a great shepherd?

Jesus, the one through whom his Father has spoken — Jesus, the one who died for your salvation — Jesus, the one who is risen from the dead — he is now, today, your great Shepherd.

And this great Shepherd watches over your life in such a way that not a hair can fall from your head apart from his will.

Wherever you are today - whatever phase of your life - whatever difficulty, whatever struggle with sin — Jesus, your great Shepherd is with you. And God's eternal covenant has been sealed with you by the shed blood of this shepherd. For he is a good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep — to be more specific, he lays down his life for you, beloved.

And by the means of this Great Shepherd, by the means of the eternal covenant that has been sealed with his blood, the God of peace will now complete in you everything good that you may do his will — working in you that which his pleasing in his sight.

In other words, beloved, the God of peace has made this promise to you — that he will complete the work that he has begun, he will bring it to completion.

And he will do all of this through Jesus Christ.

That's how the God of peace will keep all his promises to you.

How will the God of peace wipe away your tears? Through the presence of Jesus.

How will the God of peace forgive your sins? Through the shed blood of Jesus.

How will the God of peace hear and answer your prayers? Through the continual intercession of Jesus.

How will the God of peace make you holy? Through the righteousness and purity of Jesus.

How will the God of peace raise you from the dead on the last day? Through the authority and power and bodily return of Jesus.

So grace to you, beloved. Grace to you all.

And 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.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!