

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART XV

FINAL EXHORTATION

I. The final chapter in Hebrews applies the general exhortations to remain faithful by giving more specific moral and doctrinal exhortations. It begins with a section that quickly goes over good of neighbor and control of desires.

A. The first three verses deal with hospitality, which the Jews considered to be a sacred duty, and which Jesus extended to all peoples, known or not. See, e.g., Duet. 15:7-11; Matt. 5:43, 19:19, 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37; John 13:34-35. The letters of St. Paul and others in the New Testament frequently reiterate this theme of hospitality. See, e.g., Rom. 12:9-21; 1 Thess. 4:9-12; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8, James 1:27, 2:14-17; 1 Peter 4:9-11; 1 John 4:20.

1. The letter refers to the fact that many have, in exercising hospitality, done good for angels in disguise. The Old Testament has several instances of angels appearing in disguise and rewarding or calling those who assisted them. See Gen. 18:1-10, 19:1-22; Judges 6:11-24, 13:9-23; see also Tobit 6. The implication is that such things continue to happen.

2. The letter expressly mentions sharing in the struggles of the imprisoned and ill-treated, because they would be the easiest to neglect and/or because fellow Christians (and eventually the readers themselves) would likely end up in this state. Jesus showed special solicitude the imprisoned and called upon His disciples to do the same. See, e.g., Matt. 25:36; Luke 4:16-21; see also Isaiah 58:6, 61:1-3.

B. The letter then turns to goodness of life with respect to purity and freedom from greed. The Christian moral life involves both expansiveness in goodness and guard against evil. See James 1:27.

1. There may be here a reference to the Book of Wisdom and its commentary on the effects of idolatry. See Wis. 14:24.

2. The idea is that one must be free from slavery to desires in order truly to give worthy service to neighbor and worship to God. Ancient Jewish law very strongly warned against such slavery. See, e.g., Duet. 6:6-20, 22:13-29; Prov. 7, 9:13-18. St. Paul likewise picks up upon this theme. See, e.g., Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5. In the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, Jesus likewise focuses on these themes. See, e.g., Matt. 5:27-32, 6:1-5, 24; Mark 10:1-31.

-Greed and dishonor of marriage would have been common in the world around them.

3. The section then builds upon the moral laws by commending the readers to a complete trust in God, rather than in money or the world.

- The letter quotes God's promise to Jacob, see Gen. 28:15, and the promises Moses and Joshua made to the Chosen People, when they were about to enter the Promised Land. See Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:5. The idea is that the readers should have even more confidence in facing the forces against them now, for Jesus is with them.

- It then quotes Psalm 118, which is a song of confidence and triumph in the midst of struggle. In speaking of the gates of triumph opening to the Lord and the call, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" the psalm sets the stage for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus also applies the psalm's words to Himself in saying "The stone rejected by the builder has become the corner stone" in the midst of prophesying about the kingdom being transferred from the Jewish leaders to those more worthy. See Matt. 21:42. Peter likewise uses that phrase when speaking to the Sanhedrin. See Acts. 4:11. There is thus a reminder to the people that they should not be afraid of leaders whose power is fading away.

II. The letter then gets to loyalty to leaders, guiding the people of God together in doctrine.

A. In verse 7 and again 17, the letter calls for the readers to remember their leaders and be loyal to them. Between these two passages, the letter calls for unity in doctrine and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of Christ and the praise of God.

B. The opening passage calls upon the reader to "consider the outcome of their [the leaders'] life and imitate their faith."

- The passage indicates that some at least of the leaders have died, and yet still rule. In addition, by use of the singular term "life," rather than "lives" it indicates that they share one life together. Thus, the current leaders and the deceased ones are united in one life and faith. See also 1 Cor. 12:4-31; Eph. 4:4,

- As chapter 11 did, this passage again calls upon the people to recollect the leaders who died nobly and were often martyred. See, e.g., Acts 7:59-60; Rev. 11:1-13.

C. The passage then presents the source of this unity of life and faith, that is, Jesus Christ who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (literally "into the ages.") Pope John Paul II would frequently quote this text at the end of his homilies.

- The idea is that Jesus is always the same, and thus faith in Him will not contradict what has gone before, although we may learn more about it. Thus, the people should not think that anything has changed just because a crisis is impending.

- The passage takes a familiar theme of the Old Testament about God's providence for His people and applies it to Jesus. See, e.g., Ps. 55:20, 90:2, 93:2, 102:13, 25-28, 135:13, 145:13; Lam. 5:19; Hab. 1:12. The passages that emphasize this idea of God, His name, and His kingdom being always the same typically are in the context of a plea for assistance, or an expression of confidence in the help of God, in time of distress. Jesus likewise promises that He will be with His disciples always. See, e.g., Matt. 28:20.

D. The letter then continues on with the theme of unity and consistency in faith by warning against "strange and diverse teachings."

- Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament Epistles, there are doctrinal divisions in the background that the author is combating. See, e.g., Gal. 1:8-9; Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:4; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; 2 Pet. 2; 1 John 2:18-23.

E. Along similar lines, the letter speaks of us receiving grace from eating at the altar, rather than in other meals.

1. The other meals most likely mean the Jewish ceremonial meals after sacrifices or on feasts. See also Col. 2:16. That message would be a conclusion of the reasoning of the whole letter.

2. But the letter could also refer to the pleasure and company of the world and be reminding the reader that salvation does not come from that. See Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8.

3. The passage says that instead we have an altar at which we eat and receive the grace of God. No one outside of the faith has a right to this grace, while seems to be a reference to the Eucharist. See 1 Cor. 11:23-34.

F. Returning to the theme to imitating Christ, the letter again refers to the fact that, while the Israelites or the priests ate at least part of most animals that they sacrificed, the animals who were sin offerings

were burned outside of the camp. See Lev. 4. And especially on the Day of Atonement, the priest would sacrifice a bull and a goat for the sins of himself and the people. He would then confess the sins of the people while holding his hands over another goat, and that goat would be led out into the desert, reflecting the sending away of the people's guilt. See Lev. 16.

1. The bull and the goat, like all of the sacrifices made for the sins, were not eaten because, at least symbolically, they had guilt within them. By contrast, as St. Thomas explains, we do consume the body and blood of Christ because He is the pure source of holiness. Jesus fulfilled the sin offerings by truly being sacrificed outside of the gate, but in His case, this sacrifice truly forgives sins and confers holiness.

2. The letter also calls for Christians to accept their own participation in Christ's sacrifice. Jesus spoke of the need to join with Him in sacrifice and St. Paul frequently picked up on this theme. See, e.g., Matt. 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-38; John 16:18-17:4; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil 2:3-11; Col. 1:24-29.

- The letter presents the sufferings Christians must endure in the world as making them able to join with Christ and, in fact be a "sacrifice of praise" to God. The phrase "sacrifice of praise" is likely drawn from Psalm 50, which calls upon the people to show loyalty to the covenant and obedience to the commandments as their sacrifice, describing the animal sacrifices as a mere image, worthless without a moral life. See Ps. 50:14, 23. That psalm is thus very fitting for this letter.

- The letter also says that the sacrifice of praise is the natural fruit of a confession on the lips. The idea is that, as with Christ and all of the prophets, one can expect that witnessing to the faith will lead to the suffering in the world that is a sacrifice of praise; it is as natural as fruit coming from a tree.

3. As in chapter 11, the letter again encourages Christians to seek the everlasting home in the heavenly city of God, rather than focusing on the temporary homes here on earth. In a sense the suffering on earth is a payment for the celestial homes, a payment that is but a token compared to the value of Christ's sacrifice or the value of the new homes, but a payment

needed all the same. See, e.g, Matt. 25:1-30.

4. The letter again comes back to the idea of regular sacrifices as well as heroic ones by pointing out that doing good and sharing goods are also necessary and worthy sacrifices. See Is. 1:16; Gal. 6:9-10.

5. By the sacrifices of praise, suffering and good works, the Christians are to fulfill the prophecies that all nations will make sacrifices to God. See, e.g., Is. 19:21, 56:7; Zech. 14:21.

G. The letter then concludes this subsection by again emphasizing loyalty to the leaders, pointing out that they do not have an easy task either, for they must render an account of their leadership. See, e.g., 1 Ti. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Peter 5:2-4; Jer. 23:1-8; Ez. 3:17-21, 13:1-16, 34:1-16.

- He points out that reluctant, unhappy obedience may keep one technically in union with the church but is not really a virtue and is not to one's credit. See also 2 Cor. 9:6-9. It is part of the overall idea that we are meant to be generous and cheerful in our duties, especially to God, rather than grudging.

III. As is common in Pauline letters, this letter then concludes with a prayer request, blessing, and information before the final greeting.

A. The author asks the people to pray for "us," which could mean either the leaders of the church or the Christians in Italy, where the author was living, as is indicated in verse 24. Given that the passage has just been speaking of leadership, the former meaning is more likely.

- The Pauline letters frequently include requests for prayers for St. Paul and other leaders, with the understanding that their role is difficult. See, e.g., Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1-2.

- The author also asks the people to pray that he be able to return to the Christians in the Holy Land soon. If the author was St. Paul, he was imprisoned in Rome in the middle 60s, and never was able to make that journey back to his homeland.

B. The blessing summarizes the themes of the letter.

1. It brings back the idea of God as "the God of peace." Even though the

Christians are suffering and will continue to be persecuted, God gives them the peace in heaven that the world cannot know. See John 14:27, 16:33; see also Is. 57:19; 2 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 2:14-18.

2. The letter describes Jesus as the great shepherd, a title Jesus accepted for Himself when He said that He would lay down His life for His sheep. See John 10. God had promised of old to be the Great Shepherd and to bring forth a new shepherd king for His People' and Jesus fulfills this promise. See Jer. 23:4-6; Ez. 34:11-31; Ps. 23:1.

- This passage is the first one in the letter that refers to Jesus as the great shepherd. There are perhaps three reasons to use this title here. First, in keeping with the overall idea that Christ is the fulfillment of all the promises, Jesus also fulfills the promise of God as the new shepherd and the king as a shepherd. See Ps. 78:70; 2 Sam. 5:2; Is. 40:11, 63:11. Second, the passage emphasizes the need to stay with Jesus' guidance for protection and for finding the fields of everlasting life. Third, the reference reflects an understanding that the world is dangerous and full of wolves, but that Christ is with us to fend them off.

3. The blessing also refers to the fact that Christ was brought up from the dead by the Great Shepherd "through the blood of the eternal covenant." At one level God had , this statement simply reiterates that theme that God promised of old that He would establish an eternal covenant with His People. Is. 55:1-5; Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 37:26. And, at the Last Supper, Jesus says that He is establishing that Covenant in His blood, which Eucharist makes present. See Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

- But the passage indicates that Jesus was raised by the blood of the covenant, which paradoxically seems to indicate that Jesus Himself rose, as least in part, through the power of the very Eucharist that He consecrated. But, in a way, it makes sense. For if Jesus is our leader in faith and the first born of the dead, it would make sense that, as the Eucharist brings us to risen life, see John 6:51, 54, so it did with the humanity of Christ.

C. The letter also mentions that Timothy has been released and that the author hopes to visit the community with them. St.

Timothy was a bishop to whom two Pauline letters of the New Testament are addressed. In addition he was in general a close collaborator with St. Paul, see Acts 16:1-3, 1 Thess. 3:2, 6; 1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10-11, and helped in the drafting of four of the Pauline letters. See 2 Cor. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, 1 Thess 1:1; Philemon 1. It appears that Timothy was imprisoned at this time, most likely in Rome, but had been released. According to ancient histories, St. Timothy became bishop of Ephesus and was martyred in 97 under the Emperor Nerva.

D. The letter has a common Pauline ending asking greetings to the leaders and to all the "holy ones," which was a common term for the Christians. See Acts 9:13; 2 Cor. 1:1; Col. 1:2, 12, 3:12. There is a universal call to holiness, see 1 Peter 1:15-16, and the author is giving the readers one last reminder that in such holiness, given by Christ, we become what we truly are in God's plans, His saints.