

A Study in Hebrews

Study Twelve

Hebrews 13:5-25

Day One

6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

v. 6 – This verse could have been the motto for Jesus and His earthly ministry. He entrusted Himself to God. On many occasions, He made men angry and they threatened Him repeatedly. Eventually they killed Him. But prior to that, Jesus had warned His followers:

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt 10:28-31).

What can man do to me? He can reject, criticize, impoverish, torture and kill me. That is about it. And in the midst of it all, God can help me. Daniel's friends knew this when the king threatened them and then threw them into a red-hot furnace:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Dan 3:13-18).

I like the attitude they had. They said that God can deliver them, but He may not. That fact did not shake their faith or cause them to waver in their commitment.

vs. 7&8 – It seems that the writer was not referring to their current spiritual leaders, but those who had given their lives to follow Jesus. Those would have been James the brother of John, Stephen the first martyr and unnamed others who had done what the writer was referring to: Did not fear man and paid for it with their lives. Remember, the writer’s target audience was Christian Jews who were wavering in their faith. James and Stephen would definitely have made an impression on them and would fit into the overall context here.

Who are your spiritual heroes of the past that still speak to you? Honor their memory by doing what they did. For Jesus is the same, the faith in Him is the same, and the benefits to His followers who obey Him are the same yesterday, today and forever. Isn’t it good to know we follow Jesus who never has a bad day, a bad mood, or a “shadow of turning.” He is consistent and now the challenge is for me to be consistent in following Him, just as those of old were.

Day Two

9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them.

10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

v. 9 – The writer knew that there are all kinds of strange doctrines out there, and there still are today. The command is to not be carried away by them, so it must be within our power to not succumb to them. How can you avoid them? I think a commitment to God’s word is the most important. I have found that the more I study God’s word, the less I can say, “This is what the Lord showed me” or “This is what I think this verse means.” I am never free to interpret the Word; the Word interprets itself.

Of course, in this context the warning was against any doctrine that diminished the role or importance of Jesus. It’s all about Jesus and no matter how worthy any movement or doctrine sounds, it must stand the “Jesus test.” Does that doctrine exalt Jesus and increase the follower’s devotion and commitment to Him? If not, then leave it alone.

Then the writer cautioned against putting any faith in ceremonial foods, which of course Jews were doing at that point in time. As we close this study, the writer was still focusing on the main topic: Convincing wavering Jews who were followers of Jesus to not abandon their faith for something less. You have to admire the writer’s focus. He never wavered from his original theme.

The Levites were permitted to eat the sacrifices of the Old Testament, once the blood had been removed. But these foods had no power against sin; they were simply for the nourishment and provision of God’s servants. The writer would not want the readers to do anything that didn’t benefit them spiritually and, of course, the only true spiritual nourishment is Jesus. Jesus Himself said this and many of his followers misunderstood:

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:53-59).

Are you feasting on Jesus, or is some other food taking up room in your spiritual stomach? Any food except Jesus is like cotton candy; it looks good, but melts in your mouth and has no nutritional value.

v. 10 – The Levites had an altar to eat from, but we have another altar, a spiritual one, that only those who call upon the name of Jesus can utilize. Are you visiting this altar regularly for the sustenance that you need?

Day Three

11 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.

12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

13 Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

vs. 11-13 – In previous studies, we noted how many things in the Old Testament were a type or shadow of Jesus and the good things to come. The offerings for the forgiveness of sin were no exception. Sin offerings were not consumed but were burned, their remains being carried outside the city or camp and disposed of. That was a shadow of Jesus' sacrifice for sin. What Jesus did, He did alone, separated and apart from public consumption.

It is good to study the Old Testament, but all roads, even in the Old Testament, lead to Jesus. And we must always follow those roads, joining Jesus in His ministry wherever it may lead us. We must bear some of the disgrace that He bore because we are His followers. People seem to have more "respect" for a religious system, because it is easier to comprehend. But there is no "system" with Jesus except faith, and that offends many. We must be willing to bear this reproach if we are serious about being His followers. The original readers were evaluating whether that reproach was worth it and some were coming to the conclusion that it was not. The writer was trying to convince them that it was.

Are you convinced that the reproach of Jesus is worth it? Don't answer too quickly. Is your denomination, pastor, bishop or doctrine more important to you than anything?

Would you be willing to walk away from any of that if God wanted you to? Does your religious system provide you with the solace and comfort that only Jesus can and should provide? These are serious questions. I have had to face that at times I did indeed put my movement and church affiliation ahead of Him.

Day Four

14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.

16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

v. 14 – Was this a reference to Jerusalem, the “capital” of Judaism and a source of great religious pride among believing and unbelieving Jews? Perhaps. But my impression is that the writer is referring to the pilgrim’s mentality that is a part of every believer’s makeup. We know that we are citizens of heaven and do not have any lasting portion among the kingdoms of the earth.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14).

We are looking for a heavenly Jerusalem, not an earthly one. In chapter eleven, the writer had referred to Abraham, saying:

For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

If that was Abraham’s goal, it should be ours as well, don’t you think?

v. 15 – I have stated this truth throughout these Bible studies and will repeat it here: The word sacrifice in this verse does not represent doing something that we don’t want to do. A biblical concept of sacrifice is giving something to God that already belongs to Him. I have already given God my lips, along with my hands, legs, mind and heart. To now use them to praise Him, talk about Him, or serve Him is not a sacrifice. It is an honor and privilege. If you don’t want to do any of those things and then do them, it isn’t a sacrifice. That is rebellion and shows a hard heart toward God that must be changed through repentance and grace.

v. 16 – I like the connection here between worship and praise, and practical helps. We should focus on God in our worship and then focus on man in our service. Paul wrote:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the

one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Galatians 6:7-10).

A sacrifice here isn't giving something reluctantly, but rather acknowledging that what you are giving to help someone else is really God's that He is giving through you.

Day Five

17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

18 Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.

19 I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

v. 17 – As the writer urged the readers to follow the lead of those who had gone before them, he then instructed them to obey their current leaders. The work of spiritual oversight can be hard and demanding. The shepherd will be required to give an account of those who are under his or her spiritual authority.

When I was a pastor, I can remember some who were a joy to give care to, and then there were others who were, quite frankly, spiritually obnoxious or demanding. There were some I looked forward to meeting with, and then there were others who required me to take a deep breath and meet with them because Jesus wanted me to. I am not sure how spiritual leaders will give an account for their sheep. But I think the principle here is for those who are under authority to have godly attitudes that will make it easier to lead them spiritually.

This also assumes that the leaders knew their sheep, something that is much more difficult today in the era of mega churches and “church hopping”—people who move freely from church to church with no point of accountability.

v. 18 – The writer urged that the readers pray for his ministry team and for him. Does this mean that the readers knew who wrote this letter? It would seem that they did, otherwise who would they be praying for? The writer gave a quick account of their leadership: they had a clear conscience and lived honorably. That would seem to mean that they dealt with any situation that had bothered their conscience or could be cause for accusation. If you are a leader, can you make the same statement? I have always tried to use the instructions of Peter as a guideline for my own spiritual leadership:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you,

but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:2-4). So we see that we should pray for our leaders and give them cause for joyful oversight. In return, leaders should lead the flock not as Gentiles lead, but as Jesus led.

v. 19 – So the readers did know who was writing to them! And this person had been in their midst. I wonder if the beginning of the letter that contained the writer’s name has somehow been lost over time. But my own theory is that the writer could not reveal his name since some readers would perhaps have been offended or would have rejected the content of the letter because of who wrote it. That is why I think the apostle Paul wrote this letter or at least collaborated on its content. He was not popular with many Jewish believers, but Paul had a burden to see “his people” come to know Christ. But all that is my opinion and theory. If the Holy Spirit would have wanted us to know who wrote this letter, we would know. But we don’t, so it is only a matter of educated speculation that doesn’t really matter much.

Day Six

20 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,
21 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.

vs. 20&21 – What a great prayer! I have often said that if you don’t know what to pray, then find the Holy Spirit-inspired prayers of the Bible and pray them. In fact, I have a list of those prayers on my website at http://www.purposequest.com/bible_studies.htm. Feel free to download that list and to begin using it in your prayer life.

Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep. Any pastor is simply an under-shepherd, caring for the flock as Jesus directs. As a pastor, I always took the Lord’s words in Ezekiel to heart and I include them here for any pastor or future pastor to consider:

1 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

7 "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

11 "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice" (Ezekiel 34:1-16).

As you read this long passage, can you identify the main objectives that God wants any shepherd to have?

Day Seven

22 Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

23 I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

24 Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

25 Grace be with you all.

v. 22 – I don't consider this a short letter, do you? It is one of the longer letters included in the New Testament. And this letter was intended to exhort those wavering in the faith to stabilize. Do you think the writer achieved his purpose for which he wrote the letter?

I am more and more impressed with writing as a means to communicate, maintain, direct and even rebuke. I have always been hesitant to write letters and even urged people whom I counseled not to write letters but rather to go to the person or persons involved. But I am seeing the value in leaving a record behind and in giving people something to

read and re-read. Obviously the Holy Spirit thought letters were a good idea, for most of the New Testament is made up of letters. So, are you ready to do more writing?

v. 23 – This one verse sounds to me like Paul wrote this because he spoke about Timothy in such familiar terms. But we cannot say for sure. But we can say with certainty that Timothy was a faithful brother who served Paul and the Lord with distinction. Remember what Paul wrote about him to the Philippians:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon (Philippians 2:19-24).

I have made it my goal to be like Timothy: faithful in the service of others. But this is hard to do. If Paul only saw one like Timothy, then a man like Timothy must be a rare thing. But even we can't attain to Timothy's faithfulness, we can still try to do so. The Church of Jesus will be the better for our efforts, don't you agree?

v. 24&25 – The last words of the letter included “grace.” It is obvious that the writer, even though he wrote some hard things, wanted the grace of God to abound in the lives of the readers. Is that your goal when you deal with God's people? Is grace your goal? If not, it should be.

And I hope that grace is what you have received from these studies. As we close another book, I urge you to continue your studies of God's word. Devote time to this study and go to school if you can. Read and continue to learn and grow in the knowledge of God. I pray that the Lord will use these studies to bring grace and peace to you and yours. God bless you. Amen.