

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 18

Attuned to the Coming City

(Hebrews 13:1-25)

A Key Passage

In a way this passage (13:11-14) sums up the message of the entire book. Yes, the Writer has taught us that Jesus is both divine and human. He has depicted him as the great High Priest, the ultimate reality to whom all the "shadows" point. He emphasized the decisive nature of his work and the completeness of our salvation. He has stressed the importance of faith and shown us that real faith results in appropriate action. He has acknowledged that we may well have to suffer in a world that does not recognize the Lordship of Christ. And he has urged us to persevere no matter what, assuring us that our confidence will be richly rewarded. Now he places all his exhortations in a nutshell:

So Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore for here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:12-14).

The Chapter as a Whole

Yes, Hebrews is like a treatise, but *it is a letter*. The author had a specific audience in view, and so it contains some general exhortations and personal greetings, as is usual in the closing sections of letters. These are extremely important. Indeed, they highlight the most essential characteristics of the Christian life. Here, I shall list them, and we shall be giving attention to them one at a time over the next few months.

The necessity of love: "Keep on loving as brothers and sisters" (13:1)

The importance of hospitality: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers . . ." (13:2).

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Empathy and care for those who are mistreated: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them . . ." (13:3)

The sanctity of marriage: "Marriage should be honoured by all . . ." (13:4)

Contentment instead of materialism: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have . . ." (13:5-6).

Prayerful respect for spiritual leaders: "Remember your leaders . . . Have confidence in (them) and submit to their authority because they keep watch over you as those who must give account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you" (13:7, 8, 17).

The maintenance of spiritual liberty: "It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating of ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who observe such rituals" (13:9-10).

The need for costly discipleship: "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (13:11-14).

The practice of genuine spirituality, towards God and others: "Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise . . . and do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (13:15-16)

That Marvellous Benediction

"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 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."

Of course, this benediction sounds wonderful, but if we stop and think about it, each phrase is deliberately chosen. Why does the Writer describe God as "the God of peace?" Why does he mention the resurrection of Jesus? He *is* the great Shepherd of the sheep, but why does the author draw attention to that fact? His prayer is that God will equip us with everything good for doing God's will. We could pray this prayer for ourselves every single day. And the good news is that ***God is every bit as interested in equipping us to do his will as he was to bringing Jesus back from the dead!***

The Message in Microcosm (13:11-14)

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At some stage in our lives, almost all of us are tempted to reconsider our commitment to Christ. Intellectual difficulties, trials, suffering, opposition, and sometimes the allure of the world incline us to settle for a form of discipleship that will relieve the tension and possibly make things easier. Few, if any, start out on the road of rationalization and compromise imagining that this could land us in serious trouble and ultimately compound the tension we feel rather than alleviate it.

The Hebrew Christians were in this position. Some were having second thoughts. And the Writer provides them with excellent reasons not to "throw away (their) confidence" (10:35). He has contrasted the fulfillment under the New Covenant with the incompleteness of the Old. As we have seen, he refers regularly to Old Testament passages, especially to those that describe the sacrificial ritual. In this passage he returns to the events of the Day of Atonement. The blood of the sacrificial animals was carried into the Most Holy Place to be sprinkled on the atonement cover (Ex. 25:17-22; Lev. 16:15-17). But the bodies of the animals were burned outside the camp, a location deemed unholy in the years of Israel's wilderness sojourn (Lev 16:27-28). The Writer doesn't miss the parallel. Jesus, whose blood was shed for us, died outside the city gate (that's where crucifixions took place; see John 19:20). In a sense, he was thrust from the city, expelled from society. He became a public disgrace. If we are going to follow him, we must be prepared to "go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

One of the classics on the subject is *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He states simply: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹ The book is worth a thoughtful read.

Hebrews teaches us many things about Jesus and our salvation. It contains inspiring encouragement and severe warnings. It really is a call to no-nonsense commitment and discipleship. That's why this little passage (13:11-14) is so appropriate. To be a follower of Jesus in this age is to be prepared to share his destiny and that includes some form of suffering. It may mean ostracism. The world may say, "Get outside the city. You are not worthy of us." In such cases God says, "The world is not worthy of (you)" (11:38). In numerous cases it has even meant death.

True disciples are attuned to the coming city. "Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:14; cf. 11:13-16; 1 Pet 2:11-12).

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 79.

Some Questions to Consider

1. What do you think hospitality really means? Why should we be hospitable? What if you do not have the wherewithal to entertain lavishly?
2. Are these miscellaneous exhortations or do they flow naturally from the first exhortation ("Keep on loving as brothers and sisters")
3. How might materialism cripple your spiritual life? And what is the antidote to our tendency to become materialistic? (13:5-6; 1 Tim 6:6-10, 17-19)
4. We are told to have confidence in our leaders? What does this mean? What if our leaders are not worthy of confidence? Is this an attitudinal thing? If a person is constantly criticizing or undermining spiritual leaders, what should we do about it?
5. Hebrews 13:11-14 is the message of the book in microcosm. Explain this statement. Do you agree with it?