

SESSION TWENTY-EIGHT

THE EPILOGUE TO THE BOOK

Heb 13:18-25

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the book, the author has argued for the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old Covenant. The New Covenant, based on the blood of Christ, is associated with the heavenly New Jerusalem, and that is what the readers should be seeking (13:14). Enduring *by faith* will ensure that they arrive there successfully, i.e., that a full reward await them, including a share in the Son's inheritance and the right to exercise dominion with Him. Part of their endurance includes a New Covenant lifestyle which reflects brotherly love, a willingness to bear the reproach of Christ and suffer for His sake, and contentment in spiritual treasures rather than the "love of money." The author has pointed out these (and other) matters in Heb 13:1-17. For these Jewish brethren, detaching themselves from the earthly Judaism and its erroneous teachings may be difficult, but they are reminded that they have a better "altar" (*the cross!*) and can offer up sacrifices that really do please God. Animal sacrifices will not please God, but "confessing His name," doing good and sharing will.

Verses 18-25 of chapter 13 comprise the epilogue to the book. This is developed in three parts:

- 1) a request for prayer
- 2) a benediction
- 3) an epistolary closing with greetings to be extended

II. THE AUTHOR'S REQUEST FOR PRAYER (13:18-19)

In the opening words of verse 18, the request for prayer is expressed in the plural—*for us* (περὶ ἡμῶν). The author has spoken with an "editorial plural" before. For example, "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you" (6:9). Lane, however, understands that the deliberate use of the plural pronoun "us" is more than just editorial (note the shift back to the singular in vs 19). Rather, the author meant to include himself among the leaders that he had just encouraged them to obey in verse 17. If Lane is correct in this thesis, then this might suggest that there had once been a close relationship between the author and the present leaders of the Christian community. Either the author had once lived in this same area himself, or he had at least ministered there for some length of time. In any case, he seems to be coming to the defense of the Christian leaders of the community.

Hence, his reference to the fact that "we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves commendably in all things" (my translation) is *clearly apologetic* as Lane (2:556) has argued:

"The formulation of v 18*b* is clearly apologetic. It defends the integrity of the motives and conduct of the leaders whose counsel and guidance the community appears to have resented."

The author's reference to a "clear conscience" may mean in regard to their conduct (both his and the other leaders) toward the readers. Whatever tension there may be between the readers and the Christian leaders, the author suggests to them that the leaders have sought God's will for the readers. They have acted with the motive of conducting themselves commendably. The verb translated "to conduct ourselves" (ἀναστρέφεισθαι) is the present infinitive passive form of ἀναστρέφω. The author had used a related noun form (ἀναστροφή) back in verse 7 in regard to the former leaders. This suggests that he deliberately meant to draw a comparison of the present leaders (and their conduct) with that of the former leaders who had died and were no longer with them. The integrity of the former leaders (which apparently held the respect of the readers) is that which the present leaders were seeking to emulate. The author's use of terms is meant to gain greater respect for the present leaders in the eyes of the readers whose faith has been wavering.

The request for prayer ("pray for us") seems at first glance to be general, but the author probably has in mind prayer that the leaders can *continue* to lead in just such a commendable way before God (with good conscience and commendable conduct in all things). The verb translated "pray" is in the present imperative, which suggests a durative force ("continue to pray for us"). Significantly, the author sees *prayer* as the key to resolving the present tension between the readers and their leaders. Just as the leaders should lead in a godly way (with a good conscience that they are shepherding the sheep in the will of God), so the flock (including the readers) need to be in continual prayer on behalf of the leaders.

Verse 18 applied to all the leaders (among whom the author included himself). In verse 19, the author urges that their prayers be directed at him personally, namely, that he might be restored to them as soon as possible. This certainly indicates that he knew them personally, though what relationship he had had with the members of this house church cannot be precisely determined.

III. A BENEDICTION FOR THEIR SPIRITUAL PROGRESS (13:20-21)

The request for prayer in verses 18-19 naturally leads to a prayer-wish on their behalf. He does not merely ask that God make them complete; he reminds them who this God is. He is none other than the "God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep, i.e., our Lord Jesus, by virtue of the eternal covenant" (my translation). Lane (2:561) suggests that the phraseology of this statement is drawn from Isa 63:11-14 (LXX). In that passage, however, Moses was in view. Moses, as a "shepherd of the sheep" (i.e., of Israel), had been brought up by God from the Red Sea, so that he could lead the children of Israel on to Mount Sinai to receive the Law. It was there at Mount Sinai that Moses and the people received the Old Covenant, the ceremony being inaugurated by the blood of animals. Thus, an implied comparison is being drawn between Moses (whom God brought up from the sea to inaugurate the Old Covenant) and Jesus (whom God brought up from the dead). Jesus' superiority to Moses is seen in the fact that Jesus is called "the great shepherd of the sheep." Hence, the New Covenant (here called "the eternal covenant") is superior to the Old.¹ Lane contends that the expression ἐν αἵματι (translated "through the blood" by the *NASB*) should be understood causally—*by virtue of* or *on account of* the blood of the eternal covenant. That is, God brought Jesus up from the dead, because of what He had done in making atonement for our sins through His blood.

¹ Although the expression "eternal covenant" is not used elsewhere of the New Covenant, we are told in Heb 9:12 that Christ's blood secures an eternal redemption. This implies that the covenant itself is eternal.

The prayer is specifically that this same God would make them complete by/with every good thing (NIV "equip you with everything good") to do His will.² The importance of doing the Father's will was underscored in Heb 10:36: "you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised." The author really wants them to ultimately receive what God has promised for those who faithfully endure. This promise-reward for the future is of paramount importance. However, they first must *do the will of God*. Heb 13:21, then, is his wish (note the optative verb καταρτίσαι) that God would help them to that end.

God's help amounts to an inner working in their lives: "accomplishing in us what is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ." For God to inwardly accomplish what is pleasing, there must be a cooperative exercise of faith. This reminds us of what was said in Heb 10:38, that God finds no pleasure in the one who "shrinks back" (cowardly in unbelief). Rather, God looks for faith, and that is what pleases Him (11:6). Furthermore, this *divine accomplishment* in us is "through Jesus Christ." Here, we are reminded once more of our need for Christ as our high priest. He is able to "save completely those who draw close to God through Him" (Heb 7:25). Through Christ's help as our high priest and by our response in faith to God and His Word, we can live to do His will. This, of course, presumes our successful response to His discipline designed to affect His holiness in our lives. To such a wonderful high priest belongs "the glory forever and ever" (13:21; cf. 1:3; 2:9; 3:3).

IV. AN EPISTOLARY CLOSING WITH GREETINGS TO BE EXTENDED (13:22-25)

In closing, the author urges them to *bear with* this "word of exhortation." Noting the use of a similar expression in Acts 13:15 where Paul and Barnabas were offered the opportunity to give a word of exhortation, Lane (2:568) concludes, "The expression appears to have been an idiomatic designation for the homily or edifying discourse that followed the public reading from the designated portions of Scripture in the hellenistic synagogues." Thus, the author intended that his epistle be read as a *homily* for them in the public assembly.

He alerts them that Timothy had been released. This is apparently the same Timothy who had ministered with Paul (though that in itself would not prove that Paul was the author). Apparently, he was imprisoned for his faith. Paul had once exhorted Timothy to not be ashamed of the fact that Paul was a prisoner and even be willing himself to suffer for the gospel (2 Tim 1:8). Timothy faithfully heeded Paul's words. The author anticipated that he would likely be able to see the readers, if Timothy were able to join up with him in the near future.

In verse 24, the author encourages them (with pastoral sensitivity) to greet their leaders and all the saints. This was a wise suggestion, for such an act would bring the readers and their leaders together (and hopefully foster their reconciliation along with a fresh willing spirit to *move on to maturity*). He also extends the greetings to the readers of "those from Italy." This could mean either (1) those who were at that time in Italy (which would suggest that the author wrote from there); or (2) those who had once been in Italy but had been forced to relocate. A similar

² Lane attempts to suggest that the "good" is specifically *spiritual gifts* that will enable them to do His will. This suggestion, however, seems a bit forced, as the accomplishment of God's will is not dependent on spiritual gifts.

expression to ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας occurs in Acts 18:2, which might favor option two. Perhaps they were part of those who had relocated due to Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome.

At last, the author ends his homily on a grand note: "Grace be with all of you." This was an appropriate closing, reminding them of the inexhaustible grace of God which was available to them in their spiritual pilgrimage to God's *greater rest* and the heavenly New Jerusalem. Likewise, it is a reminder to us of our daily need to draw on the unlimited supply of God's grace. We must never forget that we have been invited to come boldly before the throne of grace! My prayer is that you, the reader, will be greatly moved by this study of Hebrews to faithfully endure with Christ that one day you might reign with Him who loves you enough to share His inheritance with you. This is none other than God's Son, the heir of all things . . . the One whom He has spoken through in *these last days*.