

Chapter 13

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.

Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.

Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all.

Amen.

Commentary:

The last chapter of Hebrews is an amalgam of exhortation and instruction. The author's thoughts flow freely from subject to subject. But, every line reminds the readers of important Christian principles. He began with the primary characteristic of true conversion - brotherly love.

{1} - Let brotherly love continue.

The two words "brotherly love" translate one Greek word, "*Philadelphia*," which is derived from the words "*philos*," or friend, and "*adelphos*," or brother. In the New Testament it is used of the love Christians have for one another owing to their common spiritual life. It is the same word Paul used when he wrote –

“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.” (Rom. 12:10)

It is this type of Christian brotherhood that Jesus designated as the hallmark of genuine faith –

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35)

In Jesus' statement, He used the term "*agape*," which means "beneficial, benevolent, charitable, sacrificial love." It is rare indeed to find people who will put the well being of others ahead of themselves. But, that is what the Spirit of God produces when He indwells sinners and converts them to Christians.

Paul picked up this theme when he wrote –

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” (Phil. 2:3)

Again, only people who are driven and guided by the Spirit will ever produce such fruit. But, it is in keeping with the nature and character of God. His "*agape*" love for His people caused Him to give His Son. His Son gave His life. That sacrifice resulted in the advent of the Spirit. And, that Spirit recreates believers in the image of the Son, making them sacrificial in their love of the brethren. And, when that Christian charity manifests itself in us, Christ takes it personally –

“Then shall the king say to them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And, the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Mat. 25:34-40)

So, according to the Hebrews author, we are to let that love which only Christians can produce continue to grow in our midst. When others witness our sacrificial charity and humble preference of each other, they will wonder at us and glorify God.

Okay, you say, it's easy to share kindness with brethren. I like my friends. But, what about people who are strange to me?

{2} - Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Christian charity ought to extend to every aspect and detail of our lives. We ought to do everything as "unto the Lord". And, charity to strangers speaks volumes about the kind of people we are. But, this was not an idea unique to Christianity. Even the law of Moses included -

“Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Ex. 22:21)

And –

“For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which rewardeth not persons, nor taketh reward. He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10:18-20)

In Hebrew tradition it was expected that if a sojourner came into a city and had no place to stay that he would sit at the gate of the city and anyone who had the available space was to offer shelter. One day Abraham's nephew, Lot, found two strangers sitting in the gate of Sodom. Knowing it was a wicked place, and not one where strangers ought to spend the night unguarded, he beckoned –

“Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early and go on your ways.” (Gen.19:2)

But, they argued, “Nay; but we will abide in the street all night.” Lot pressed them and they finally agreed. He whipped up a feast and they all ate together. Well, that night as they prepared to sleep the men of Sodom encircled Lot's house and insisted, “Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them.”

Lot went out, shut the door behind him, and begged the men to turn from their wicked intentions. He offered the mob his two virgin daughters, “...only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.” That only made things worse, and they pressed on him to break down the door. But, the two strangers opened the door, pulled Lot in, slammed it closed, and smote all the men outside with blindness “...so that they wearied themselves to find the door.”

After that, the two men told Lot that they had come to save him and his family from the destruction that was about to befall the city. In the morning, the two

men, now identified as angels, grabbed Lot by the hand, along with his wife and two daughters, and led them out of the city.

The angels of God who had come to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah rescued Lot. It was an act of mercy on God's part, in response to a conversation with Abraham. But, it also occurred because Lot showed kindness to strangers, and it turned out he had "entertained angels unawares."

So, says the Hebrews author, knowing that such things are possible and part of our common history, remember to show kindness to strangers. You never know whom they may turn out to be. One more example -

After His death and resurrection, Jesus met up with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus, but He hid His identity from them. He talked with them about the events of that week and He taught them that it was perfectly in keeping with Scripture for Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory. But, as they drew close to the village, the stranger acted as though He would keep going. The evening grew near, so the two men constrained Him, saying, "Abide with us; for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent." So, He went in, sat at meat and broke bread with these two disciples who were charitable toward a stranger. But, when He took the bread and broke it, giving them each a piece, their eyes were opened and they suddenly knew who was sitting at their table. Instantly, He vanished from their sight.

Again, the message is simple. Show kindness for Christ's sake. He was kind to you, giving you what you could never deserve. Show such charity to strangers, not on the basis of what they deserve but out of grace and mercy. If the stranger is a Christian you are performing the service to Christ, Himself.

But, what if the stranger is a non-believer, or an enemy?

"Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:10-21)

{3} - Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.

This is in keeping with the theme of the first two verses. The First Century Christians were subject to all sorts of torture and loss of personal freedom. Simply proclaiming allegiance to Christ was sufficient cause to lose all your property, be imprisoned, and tortured to death. Under this cruelty and constant threat, the author exhorted his audience to remember those who are bound for their faith and empathize as being chained with them. Remember them, said the author, in such a way that you share their pain and grieve their loss. But, as Paul said,

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil.1:12)

What sort of wonder must it have been before the Roman persecutors when these men and women died singing hymns to God and would rather be shredded by wild beasts than recant their testimony? And, what sort of church would evolve today if we lived by such basic, simple principles? What if we actually preferred others to ourselves? What if we actually loved the brethren sacrificially? What if we shared our earthly goods with every man, knowing that Christ was watching and approving our generosity? What if we so empathized with our brethren that not a one of them could suffer without the whole body gathering around to support them?

It would be --- well, a Christian Church!

{4} - Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.

In keeping with the author's style of instructing through contrast, he turns his attention to the most private, intimate relationship a human has - the marriage bed. The institution of marriage was created by God, and the first man, Adam, laid out the basis of the marriage relationship.

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24)

In the eyes of God, men and women who engage in sexual union are no longer two distinct people, but one flesh. That union of the two into one becomes the symbol of Christ's perfect union with His betrothed people. Paul likened the marriage relationship to Christ, the bridegroom, and His wife, the church. Just as a wife is to be a "chaste virgin", knowing no other lovers but her husband, the church is to know no other husband, nor chase after strange gods.

“For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy; for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2Cor. 11:2)

Even the final gathering of the church to join eternally with their Lord is presented with marriage metaphors. It is called "The Marriage Supper of the Lamb."

“Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And, to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white; for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And, he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And, he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.” (Rev. 19:8-10)

Chastity before marriage and faithfulness in marriage is more than just a Christian ideal for righteous living. It is typical of Christ and His relationship to His Church. Staying chaste, being espoused to a husband while still a virgin, is our current state as we wait for our bridegroom to come take His bride to the home He has left to prepare for her. And, staying faithfully bound to our husband throughout eternity will be our final estate.

However, this language of marriage has a dark side in Scripture, as well. Throughout the Old Testament, worshipping other Gods is likened to "*whoring*".

“For thou shalt worship no other god; for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God; lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; and thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods.” (Ex. 34:14-17)

So, an unfaithful marriage is the type of men abusing their marriage vow to God and chasing after other gods. With all that in mind, the author made the observation that marriage is a completely "honourable" relationship and the marriage bed is "undefiled."

Also, though, notice what he did not say. He did not say, "Keep the bed undefiled". I have heard preachers use this text to condemn whatever sort of activity they were personally opposed to. But, the author did not take the time to spell out any particulars. He simply stated that a man and woman, under the auspices of marriage, could be joined sexually without any fear that their union made them unclean.

However, chasing other lovers outside the marriage commitment was never something that God blinked at. He will most certainly judge the whoremonger (who pays money for sex) and the adulterer (who has sex outside his marriage). Not only do such actions fly in the face of Godly behavior, they destroy the type of God's faithful relationship with His people.

{5} - Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

This is a very natural flow of thought. People who commit sexual sins are people who are not content with their marriage - otherwise they would have no reason to stray. And, even the tenth commandment says –

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.”

Covetousness grows from discontentment. Yet, the author adjures us to be content with what we have, knowing that we are in the will of Sovereign God who will protect us, feed us, provide for us and keep us. After all, Christ has proclaimed that He will never leave us, nor forsake us. That fact alone ought to be sufficient to keep us from constantly seeking greater fleshly gratification and teach us to be gratefully content with our lot in life.

Abram was a wealthy man when God told him to move from his father's house and start wandering. Over time, Abraham's earthly wealth increased until the land could no longer hold both him and his nephew. After Abram rescued Lot from the enemy kings, he encountered Melchizedek. Melchizedek blessed Abram and received the tenth of all the spoils from Abraham's hand. Then, Abraham returned the spoils of the war back to the kings saying,

“I have lifted up mine hand unto the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich.” (Gen. 14:22-23)

The very next thing we read about Abram is that the Lord visited him in a vision and said,

“Fear not Abram, I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”

The riches of kings could not satisfy Abram. But, he had a reward that outweighed the most precious artifacts of earth. God, Himself, was Abram's reward.

And, that is why we ought to be content. We should know that God is always with us, never leaving us, and an exceeding great reward. Knowing that, how petty it is to long for the things of this world which corrupt in time and wither away like the dust. God, who will never forsake us, is our exceeding great reward.

{6} - *So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.*

If we live contented lives, knowing that our Maker and Redeemer is providing for our every need, then we can resist the temptations of the flesh. With God as our shield, and Christ as our helper, we need not be concerned with the way men will perceive us - or the damage they may do to us.

Remember, too, that the author was writing to First Century Christian converts who were under great persecution for their faith. As Jews converted to Christ, they were shunned, driven from the temple, and sought out by vicious Jewish leaders. As Christians, they were tortured and killed by Roman attempts to quell "the way." So, they were reminded that the worst men could do was kill their bodies. But, our Lord has overcome death and vanquished our enemy. Nothing men do to a Christian can defeat the unique relationship we have with the God of ages.

That is the root of contentment. Being satisfied with the lot in life that God has assigned us will buffer us from the temptations of the flesh. Knowing that God has our best interests at heart and is guiding our steps will keep us from being frustrated and dissatisfied when we see our neighbor's possessions. And, knowing that our ultimate reward is God Himself helps us rise above the petty concerns of this life and the threats of evil men.

With God as our shield and protector, our husband and our great reward, we can say that we are truly blessed people.

{7,8} - Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.

I prefer to see these two verses as one statement. There is no punctuation in the original Greek text, so I find the period in the middle of this thought, followed by the fragment about Christ's eternal nature, very strange. If I were punctuating this segment it would read " ...considering the end of their conversation - Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today, and forever."

But, let's start at the top of this verse and work our way to the conclusion.

Translators differ over how to properly frame this series of fragmented statements. As a result, they have come up with slightly differing versions of these two verses, with different emphases. Some, like the ASV and NAS, see the rulers who spoke the word of God in the past tense. In that case, the author may be calling his First Century readers to remember the apostles who had been martyred. Some, like the KJV, read it the present tense; a reminder to remember those who are actively engaged in the work of the ministry. In either case, the message is: Follow the faith of Godly men who preached the word, led the Church and died without recanting their profession.

But, the author was careful to point out that we are not to put our faith in faithful men. Rather, we are to study and consider the central focus of their faith - which is Christ.

In this day and age of men-centered religion and the "cult of personality", where worldwide ministries are built on the charisma and telegenic qualities of one central figure (or, two if he brings his wife along), the idea of "rulership" within the church has been abused. Fortunately, such "ministries" have a built-in self-destruct mechanism because they splinter when the central character is removed.

But, the author wisely instructed his readers to look beyond the men who preached the gospel and lock their gaze on the One who never changes, never moves, is constant and trustworthy - "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today, and forever."

As well, "philosophical relativism" has bewitched our societal conscience. "If it's right for you then no one can tell you it's not right for you." In other words, there is no higher authority than any individual's freedom of choice. But, the author had no hesitancy in referring to church leaders, those who preached the word, as "them which have the rule over you." Church leadership has come under heavy attack recently both from within and without the church. Scandal and abuse have made the church an easy target for criticism. But, as the old adage goes, "The cure for wrong use is not NO use, it's proper use."

The Church has always needed Godly leadership and strong rulership. Error and deception are always at the church door awaiting an invitation. No sooner had Paul brought the gospel to Galatia than they had to deal with false brethren who sneaked in privately to spy out the liberty Paul preached. Without a fierce commitment to God's word and the courage to stand for what is right, a church will fall into all sorts of error and factions. That is why God provided His church with leaders, those who have the "rule" over the body.

Remember them, says the author. They need your prayers, they need your support, and they need your encouragement. Later the author will say, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you."

Leadership is a tough chore. Leadership within the body of Christ is doubly difficult.

Only if the body is knit together by God's spirit will the leadership rule wisely and the body follow humbly.

Only when God's spirit is present will the leaders rule humbly and the body follow wisely.

But, to iterate the point, when a disciple follows one who has the "rule" over them, they are to emulate the leader's faith, not worship the leader. They are to consider the same source of life that the leader faithfully follows. The central, primary, absolutely necessary focus of saving faith is Christ and Christ alone - single, solitary, undiluted, unchanged, unswerving, unturning, complete, and in whom alone rests all authority in Heaven and earth.

{9} - Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines.

In Christ's day, just as today, there was a nut on every corner spouting the latest nonsense and claiming to have some divine revelation. What is more amazing is that for every nut who is propagating some new drivel, there are ten more nuts willing to stop and listen to him. In order to raise a church that will stand the tests and trials of worldly philosophy and increasingly maniacal raving lunatics dressed in sheep's clothing, we must be firmly rooted and grounded in "thus sayeth the Lord."

The Church is drifting away from God's declared word in favor of show business and fund raising. More entertainment value means more people show up and that means more money to build bigger buildings and buy more airtime. It's easy to shave the edges off the more divisive elements of Biblical doctrine in order to make it more easily consumed by the mass audience. But, Jesus never worked to attract the mass audience. He always taught the elect and left the balance to themselves. He preached such unpopular doctrine that His own disciples once asked, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" They were offended by His teaching. (John 6:60-61)

Correct doctrine and Biblical theology can divide people. It is easier to just "go along and get along." But, we are both called and instructed to give heed to sound doctrine (Titus 2:1) and flee from strange, or unscriptural, teaching. Read Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus -

“Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they **teach no other doctrine**, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.” (1 Tim 1:2-4)

“If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of **good doctrine**, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” (1 Tim 4:6-7)

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and **doctrine**. For the time will come when

they will not endure **sound doctrine**; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.” (2 Tim 4:2-5)

“[Be] a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by **sound doctrine** both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.” (Titus 1:8-14)

Solid doctrine, honest Bible-based teaching, and Godly leadership are the first line of defense against the confusion and wickedness that mark our times. And, we are to keep our eyes fastened, our attention centered, our thoughts consumed with the unchanging Lord.

{10} - We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.

Second only to the Ark of the Covenant, the altar was the most important piece of furniture in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and later in the temple. The earliest altars were purposely crude, just piles of rocks on which animals could be slain and burned.

The idea of an altar predates the Levitical law. The first mention of an altar in Scripture is found in Genesis 8:20, after the flood. Noah had taken two of every creature into the ark, but of the clean animals, suitable for sacrifice, he took seven.

“And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And, the LORD smelled a sweet savour...” (Gen. 8:20-21a)

The second altar was built by Abraham after God had promised him the land of Canaan, in Genesis 12:7 –

“And, the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land; and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.”

Everywhere that Abram moved, one of the first things he did was set up an altar, including the one on which he laid Isaac. Still, we do not have a description of what constituted an altar until the law was instituted.

“An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen; in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone; for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.” (Ex. 20:24-26)

The altar that Jehovah required was markedly different from the altars of the false gods. The priests of Baal erected ornate, hand carved altars that were raised up on platforms, or up layers of steps like the Inca pyramids. But, Jehovah required simple rocks, unhewn and unspoiled, with sacrificial animals bleeding and burning.

In the economy of Israel, the Levites who served in the temple were given no portion of land to farm and plant. Instead, they were given a portion of everything the other eleven tribes produced. The first fruits of every harvest, as well as a portion of the tithes of all their belongings and wealth, came to the Levites. One of the privileges that the Levites enjoyed was the right to eat the flesh of the sacrificial animals. No common person could eat that flesh, only they that served in the temple, and even then they could only eat certain parts of particular sacrifices.

The altar was the place where sin was atoned for. The blood of sin offerings flowed continuously from the ditch that ran under the altar. The altar was the place where wave offerings were waved before God, where heave offerings were heaved up before God, where burnt offerings were burned before God and sweet savor offerings ascended to God's nostrils. It was at the altar that men presented their "freewill" offerings after they had satisfied all of God's other requirements.

At the altar God required men to bring forward their best animals, their first fruit, their earliest harvest, portions of everything God blessed them with, and have it utterly destroyed. Animals died, life ended, bodies were burned, offerings were decimated, God was worshipped and the priest of God ate.

But, said the Hebrews' author, we who have come before God with the testimony of Christ are a new generation of priests (Rev.1:6). Our high priest, whom we follow, is not retracing the Levitical methods of worship and sacrifice. He became the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice. But, more than that, He was sacrificed on the Heavenly altar, satisfying the righteous standard of God

completely and perfecting forever those that are His. As a consequence, we believers, have the right to partake of the body that was destroyed on that altar.

Jesus forecast this essential truth when He said,

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.” (John 6:53-58)

And, of course, that relationship is memorialized in the Lord's Supper. The priests of God who worship in spirit and in truth, their own bodies becoming the temples of the living God, have the right and privilege to feed on the sacrificial body of the final atoning work of Christ.

Now, one more observation before we move on...

If the final sacrifice has been made and the atoning work is completed and God is pleased, then sin is removed from the body of Christ on earth, the Church is cleansed and the need of bloody sacrifices is eliminated. I think we'd all agree with that. Right?

So, then why do churches continue to erect various forms of "altars" in their church buildings? The church has no more need of an altar. The idea of a "bloodless altar" – where Christ is sacrificed over and over again in the "bloodless sacrifice" of the Mass – finds its origin in the Mystery Religions of Babylon. And, the altars that churches currently erect are beautiful, ornate objects prominently displayed and often fenced-off from the congregation. But, they are empty, futile altars erected for empty, futile purposes.

As well, even churches that have no physical piece of furniture called an altar use the language of altars. They even have "altar calls", where they beg folk to come down to a set of stair steps, cry through a box of Kleenex and offer some sacrificial act of contrition. But, these are confused exercises, unfound in Scripture, where - once again - the notion of an altar is misappropriated to serve their tradition.

Christ is the final sacrifice. His body was the final bloody sacrifice. His three days in the belly of the earth constituted His bodily destruction, and God was pleased with the final sin offering. So pleased was God, in fact, that He raised that very same body to eternal life. There is no more need of any earthly altar,

just as there is no more need of an earthly sacrifice. God provided Himself a sacrifice and an altar.

{ 11 } - For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp.

The author reminded his Hebrew audience that the Deuteronomical law required the carcasses of the dead animals to be burned outside the city walls so that the rotten flesh would not pollute the city itself.

“And thou shalt kill the bullock before the LORD, by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And thou shalt take of the blood of the bullock, and put it upon the horns of the altar with thy finger, and pour all the blood beside the bottom of the altar. And thou shalt take all the fat that covereth the inwards, and the caul that is above the liver, and the two kidneys, and the fat that is upon them, and burn them upon the altar. But the flesh of the bullock, and his skin, and his dung, shalt thou burn with fire without the camp: it is a sin offering.” (Ex. 29:11-14)

And, every year when they observed the Passover, the Paschal lamb was similarly destroyed outside the camp -

“Thou mayest not sacrifice the passover within any of thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” (Deut. 16:5)

That's important, because the final Passover Lamb would eventually appear on the stage of history.

{ 12 } - Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

Golgotha, the place of the skull, the place where Roman crucifixions traditionally took place, was outside the walls of Jerusalem. And, even though the Pharisees were determined not to kill Him on the Passover, they were powerless to resist the plan of God. The Lamb of God was slain on the Passover, outside the camp. His people were sanctified and their sins were cleansed as the blood of that Lamb flowed. All the animal carcasses, the steady stream of blood, and the continual parade of priests led up to this moment when God would punish His Son in the place of His people, ushering in the New Covenant, the New Testament, in Christ's blood.

{ 13 } - Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

In order to come to Jesus, the first century Hebrews had to walk away from their traditions, leave the rules of the Pharisees, and even step out from under the Mosaic Law. They had to leave Jerusalem, the city where God had placed His name, and the city where God had established Israel. They had to go outside the camp of Israel, knowing full well that their families, friends, and the synagogue would denounce them and declare them dead. They had to be willing to bear the reproach of men in order to embrace the comfort and assurance of God.

And, that's still true. The world has set up camp and everyone inside the walls can feel secure in worldly terms. Power in numbers can assure men that their ways are all right, even righteous. And, the church has set up camp. They establish their rules of membership and sit in judgment on their recruits. They compass land and see to make one proselyte. They create forms of worship that are unknown to Scripture and raise tradition to replace true religion.

But, Christ suffered outside the camp. And, He beckons us to lay down our false hopes, walk away from our traditions, cast off our self-assurance, disavow the world's rewards, and bear His reproach.

{14} - For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

This is deep.

In the immediate context, the author was adjuring his readers to leave the traditions of Jerusalem's temple and go outside the city walls to suffer with Christ. Jerusalem was the center of their entire religious system. They were even required to attend feasts in Jerusalem three times every year. But, the author beckoned them to suffer outside the walls, outside the camp.

That had to be hard. The history of Jerusalem reached back into every crevice of Hebrew history, dating back to Abram and Melchizedek. Jerusalem stood as physical evidence that God had chosen, led and planted the nation of Israel.

But, said the author, here on earth we have no city that is invincible. We have cities that will fall eventually to time and enemies. We have no continuing city that will not decay and need rebuilding. Even Jerusalem, for all its splendor, would collapse under the ravages of time.

BUT! "But, we seek one to come!"

There will be a continuing city. There will be "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." Abram sought it when he left Ur, but he did not find it. He carried the promise, but he did not receive it. None of the Old Testament heroes of faith received the promise of the final, invincible city where Israel would be planted, never to be uprooted again. Nonetheless, the promise

remains. The city is coming. And, just as they sought it 2,000 years ago, we seek it today.

New Jerusalem will descend from Heaven, never to be defeated, never to be overcome, never to decay or fall to into the hands of God's enemies. That was Israel's hope, that was the author's hope, and it is still our hope. He saw it as a future hope, and it remains to be fulfilled.

By the way, some theologians have attempted to identify "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22) as the Church. But, this verse undermines any such ideas. The Church certainly existed in the time of the Hebrews author, yet he pointed out that they (and we) have no continuing city on earth, and are yet looking for the one to come. So, the city cannot be understood as a "spiritualized" symbol of the Church.

No, the city is a city. The Church is the Church. The Church is here today and the city is still to come. The individuals who make up the church will inhabit the city, but so will Israel when they are regathered to the New Jerusalem.

{15} - *By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.*

The altar - the place of bloody sacrifice where the priests were privileged to eat - has been done away with now that the final sacrificial Lamb of God has paid the final price for sin and atoned once for all for His people. And, of course, if the altar is done away with, so are the sacrifices that bled and burned on it.

But, is God no longer interested in sacrifice of any kind? The author told his New Covenant audience that there remained a better form of sacrificial offering to God. Rather than bringing the fruit of the field, the wave offering, the sheaf offerings, the grain offerings, the firstfruits and the meal offerings, we bring a better form of fruit - the fruit of our lips. And, we are not to bring our offering only at the feast ceremonies, but on a continual basis, praising God always and for everything.

There's an interesting "bookend" in this verse. It begins with "By him," which is a reference to Christ, carried over from verse 12. It ends with, "giving thanks to his name." In other words, only in Christ are our gifts of praise to God an acceptable sacrifice, replacing the Old Covenant animals that were destroyed for God's pleasure. And, only if we approach God under Christ's authority, and through His shed blood, "giving thanks to His name," can we expect God to hear our praise and prayers of thanksgiving.

But, it doesn't stop there. Under the Old Covenant every gift and sacrifice was given to God's service, God's temple and God's priests/temple servants. Under

the New Covenant, sacrifice includes our relationship to one another, giving not just our goods, but ourselves.

{16} - But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Under the Old Covenant, which required endless, countless good works and strictly observed actions, God never favored any man's work. But, amazingly, under the New Covenant we read that God is well pleased with the sacrifice of doing "good." The Greek term the author used is "*eupoiia*" and it only appears in this verse of Scripture. It is made up of two simple words - "*eu*" which means "well," and "*poieo*" which means "to do." It has at its root the idea of beneficence, or doing things that benefit others. In other words, it has to do with putting the well being of others ahead of your own. It is the attitude of humility and the opposite of arrogance. In fact, it's the same notion that Paul was conveying in Philippians when he wrote -

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:3-5)

After the flesh, we all desire our own benefit and we all long for greater possessions and the things that lead to a life of ease. But, the giving, sacrificial mind (which was also in Christ) is willing to forego personal gain and egocentric pursuits in favor of a brother or sister's gain and well being. And, God is well pleased with such sacrifice.

The second form of sacrifice the author mentioned is "to communicate," and he did not just mean, "Call folks up and let them know how you're doing." He used the Greek term "*koinonia*." It means, "joint participation," or "to share and have fellowship." We are fellow pilgrims on this earthly journey, in the world but not of the world, and we are called upon to share our earthly goods with our fellow travelers. We are to help our brethren by sharing our goods and money. That was one of the hallmarks of the first century church.

“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common.” (Acts. 4:32)

Again, that goes against every natural sensibility the flesh can muster up. The lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life all crave the accumulation of things in order to build our own self-importance and feeling of earthly immortality. The flesh wants to leave some monument to ourselves behind to prove that we were here. But, the sacrificial heart and mind spoils our personal belongings for the good of the body of Christ. We lay those things that the world

chases after on the altar of God's grace and we give them away with joy. Again, God is well pleased with such sacrifice. In fact, Paul instructs us,

“Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver.” (2Cor. 9:7)

The Greek word translated "cheerful" in that verse is "*hilaros*." That word was transliterated into English as "hilarious." In other words, God loves a person who gives with such joyful abandon that it is positively hilarious. That's not the way we think of giving in most churches. It is usually taught as a chore, a legalistic requirement, even Old Covenant tithes, which God demands from beaten down Christians who drag the last dollar to the collection plate. Or, the congregation is driven to give because of pressing needs, building campaigns or budget dilemmas. But, according to Paul, none of those are legitimate methods of giving and receiving offerings. Every man must determine in his heart the size of his gift and it cannot be because of pressure or necessity.

The only sacrificial giving which pleases God is giving out of a true heart for the right reasons. And, giving in love to our brethren in Christ, giving because it was first given to us, giving from a lowly heart and genuine esteem of our brethren, giving to help those who Christ loves, giving with a "hilarious" attitude, God loves. With such sacrifice God is "well pleased."

{17} - Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

Let's take this verse in parts.

Obey them that have the rule over you...

This is a reference to God's ministers, the pastors, teachers, apostles, evangelists, and prophets that God set over His Church (Eph. 4:11-15). Back in verse 7, the author instructed, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto your the word of God..."

The fact of the matter is - and despite the fact that men have historically taken advantage of clerical authority - any body of believers is blessed of God to be given a faithful pastor/teacher. And, God requires a great many attributes from His "under-shepherds." At the same time though, He advises believers to remember, follow, "communicate" with, and obey those leaders He has placed over His Church.

...and submit yourselves...

This is an important element of this crucial relationship. I once heard a pastor say, "If I can't command respect, I'll demand it!" But, that's not the way it works. Godly authority only operates under humility. That way the authority genuinely flows from God and His word, not from the puffed-up arrogance of some self-important man.

A humble, studious, dedicated man who exercises God-ordained gifts makes his calling obvious. "A man's gift maketh room for him" (Prov. 18:16). The body is called to submit to such a man. But, that submission is an act of humility, trust, and gracious sacrifice. It cannot - indeed, it must not - be beaten into people through fear and threats. Because, the pastor must be the leader in all Christian attributes and that would include "...in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."

But, the primary reason to submit to Godly leaders is -

...for they watch for your souls...

Genuine, Godly leaders are not in it for fame, wealth or power. They are called of God to watch over the souls God places in their care. That is the primary task of a pastor. Just as a shepherd is diligent to tend to the sheep - feeding, protecting, herding, and dedicating himself to their care - the pastor must watch over the sheep, care for their physical and spiritual lives, and guard their souls.

"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And, when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." (1Pet. 5:2-4)

That is a very grave responsibility.

"...as they that must give account..."

It is an interesting phenomenon in Scripture that just about every man God called did not really want the job. The service of God can be both exhilarating and terrifying. It is an awesome responsibility to deliver words to people knowing that "...to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And, who is sufficient for these things?" (2Cor. 2:16)

Whatever the full thrust of the author's words, it is clear that those who watch over God's heritage will have to give account of their ministry, their words and the people who were placed under their care. A faithful servant will give his account and it will be to the everlasting profit or detriment of those God put under his authority.

... that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable
for you.

What a joy it will be to compliment and eulogize our brethren in the courts of Heaven. To be able to call the names of our faithful friends and extol the virtues of Christ's brethren will make the labor worthwhile and rest like bliss on the head of every faithful pastor.

But, how sullen and dark a task it will be to give account of those who sat under the word and apostatized. What grief will be ours when we have to tell of those who turned away from the truth, refused to obey and submit, and who stood opposed to Christ's ministry.

"Unprofitable" is an understatement.

{ 18 } - Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things
willing to live honestly.

The author was wrapping up his epistle. He intended to add a few last words of exhortation, but he was also writing from his heart to his beloved brethren. We do not know for certain where the church was located that received this letter. We know they were in Jerusalem, but we do not know the household. And, we do not know for certain who penned these words, but we know that he was separated from them and longing to return to their fellowship.

Just as he had admonished them to remember the leadership God had placed over His Church, the author coveted their prayers as he went about his ministry. He assumed that he had performed his duties well while he was in their midst and had left behind a good reputation. His conscience was clear. He had lived honestly and was without reproach before this body of believers.

Still, he requested, remember me in your prayers. And, he included a specific prayer -

{ 19 } - But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to
you the sooner.

He longed to be reunited with the brethren, all the while understanding the good providence of God to be the determining factor. Like a loving pastor, he left them with a benediction, praying for God's blessings on them.

{20} - Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,

Though he spoke as a pastor and had made much of "them that have the rule over you," the author was careful to point out that Christ was – and is - the Great Shepherd of the sheep. The whole flock belongs to Him, and He places little flocks under His chosen pastors' care.

Each phrase the author penned is very special.

Now the God of peace...

To the First Century Hebrew mindset, God was often the God of fury, the God of punishment, the God of wrath, the God who scattered and cursed. But, in Christ they came to know the God of peace. As I have mentioned before, the word "peace" is the Greek "*eirene*" and it means "the cessation of againstness." Peace starts when the enmity stops. And, God settled the opposition, reconciling the parties, when Christ died for our sin. With our sin fully paid for, we find ourselves "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6). God is no longer the God of fearful judgment; He is the God who made the way of peace, through the Prince of Peace.

...that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus...

The whole of Christianity stands or falls on this proclamation: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Without the resurrection, Paul argued, we are false witnesses of God and we all remain in our sin, looking forward to nothing but certain judgment and eternal separation from God. But, when God raised Christ, He made obvious His acceptance of the ultimate sacrifice. The resurrection of Jesus is the single most reassuring event in human history. Because, not only is Jesus alive evermore, pleading our cause and reconciling us to the Eternal Father, but also it is proof that everything He said about Himself is true.

He was God in the flesh, and He rules the Heavens. He is our high priest, but He is our elder brother. He is the only way to the Father. He kills and He makes alive. And, best of all, He gave his life for His sheep, His friends, His elect, His bride, His people, His Church.

All of that, every bit, every whit, every part and parcel, was in the eternal plan of God, who brought Jesus up from the grave.

...that great shepherd of the sheep...

It does not matter how far we have run, how desperate our condition, or how lost we find ourselves, the Great Shepherd seeks out His sheep and returns them to His fold, carrying them on His own shoulders and protecting them from every evil which would seek to devour them. He is the Great Shepherd. There is no shepherd to compare. He is the only shepherd who would not only bring his flock from the far corners of the earth, but also lay down His life to guarantee their eternal state.

...through the blood of the everlasting covenant...

There has been plenty of debate over the last 2000 years concerning the exact content and makeup of this "everlasting covenant." There are those who say this is a reference to the Abrahamic covenant, or the New Covenant, or the covenant of salvation by grace through faith that transcends the other earthly covenants.

But, given the context, I don't think so.

I think this is a reference to the eternal agreement between the Father and the Son. Just as God elected some people and bestowed His love on them from before the foundations of the world, so Jesus was considered the "lamb slain from the foundations of the world" (Rev.13:8). The Father created the plan of redemption and the Son completed it. The Father eternally foreknew His people and determined their final state, but it was the Son who removed the sin that lay like a chasm between God and His chosen people.

The agreement between the Father and the Son always existed in the mind of God and will never be superceded by any other agreement or earthly covenant. The Son agreed to lay down His life and bear the burden of God's wrath on behalf of the sheep. The Father agreed to bring Him back up from the grave, neither leaving His soul in Sheol, nor suffering His Holy One to see corruption (Ps. 16:10).

That is the agreement that was already in place in the garden of Eden when God slew the first animal to cover their naked shame. That is the agreement that God was working out in history when He promised Abraham a miraculous child, through whom would come blessing to the entire world. That was the agreement that drew the Son of God to Earth, that nailed Him to a tree and that raised Him to eternal majesty. That is the agreement that was established in the blood of Christ.

But, what was the upshot of all this grace? What was the author's prayer? What would he have God do for these new believers?

{21} - (Now the God of peace) Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Perfection - completion - the totality of everything we need to be pleasing in the sight of God is found in Christ Jesus. His Spirit - the Holy Ghost - works through us and in us, accomplishing those good works that are satisfying and well pleasing in God's sight.

I love the ease with which the author exhorted his audience to good works, and in the same breath pointed out unflinchingly that it was the sovereign will of the Almighty that accomplished the works in and through them. We can never take credit for our efforts. We are unprofitable servants who only do that which was our duty to do (Luke 17:10). Nevertheless, after God has worked His perfect will in us, we will enter glory to the commendation, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord." (Mat. 25:21)

And, when we reach our glorious reward (which He earned on our behalf), we will never share in the credit. We will never glory in our works or efforts. In Christ abides all the glory forever and ever.

Amen and amen.

“And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all. Amen.”

After 13 jam-packed chapters, it is amusing that the author considered his epistle a “few words.” This is one of the most critical and instructed books in the Bible. In it we have witnessed the inception of the New Covenant, and its superiority over every earthly agreement, especially over the Law. Our theology has been formed and crystallized by the words of this letter, and Christ is lifted up and exalted in every word.

The author knew Timothy, who was a traveling companion of Paul and Barnabas, lending a bit more credibility to the notion that Barnabas authored this letter. But, we cannot be sure. Timothy was on his way to meet up with the author, and together they planned to visit the believers in Jerusalem. The author sent greetings to leaders of the church and to all the believers with them. He, being in

Rome, most likely visiting Paul in his imprisonment, sent greetings from the church in that area.

And, with the signature, "Grace be with you all," this vital and brilliant letter came to an end.

So, I would add this second time the author's prayer of blessing. Grace be with you all. Only by grace do we have hope. Only by grace do we have faith. Only by grace will we stand in the presence of the Eternal One.

By grace alone.

Amen.