

The Unchanging Christ

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[0 : 00] And now we are coming to our Bible reading in the letter to the Hebrews. You'll find this on page 1009. This is our final study in this letter.

It hasn't gone quite as long as Jeremiah did, but we've been traversing this letter for some 18 months or so. But we come this evening to the final study, and we'll read the whole of chapter 13.

Chapter 13, verse 1. Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the secular, immoral, and adulterous.

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have. For he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you, so we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper.

[1 : 17] I will not fear. What can man do to me? Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to today, and forever. Don't be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods which have not benefited those devoted to them.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat, for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.

[2 : 32] That is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.

Let them do this with joy, not with groaning, and that it be no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience desiring to act honorably in all things.

I urge you, the more earnestly, to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now, may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, in whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. Don't be fooled by the amen. There's a little more to come. I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.

[3 : 59] Grace be with all of you. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Our author here is emphasizing what he's emphasized right throughout the letter, that salvation is by grace through faith in the blood of Jesus, that we are sinners and are only saved by his blood.

Now, if we could please have our Bibles open at Hebrews 13, it's on page 1009. As we do so, let's have a moment of prayer.

God, our Father, we remember that when the Lord Jesus Christ walked the road to Emmaus, he unfolded the Scriptures, he made their hearts burn, and he opened their eyes.

we pray that the same Lord Christ, by the power of his gracious Holy Spirit, will open that word to us this evening, will cause our hearts to burn, cause our eyes to be opened.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. I don't know if this still happens nowadays, but in the Christmas holidays, there used to be a little ritual which rather spoiled Christmas itself.

[5 : 30] That was writing letters to relatives, thanking them for the gifts. Now, I don't know if you young people still do that. Now, you probably just flick off a text or something, because by now, your grandparents will also be in the IT generation.

But anyway, the first sentence was always easy. Dear Aunt Mildred, thank you for the socks. Or hankies, or whatever it was. Usually, their relatives were exceedingly unimaginative.

And it was that middle bit that was difficult, as you struggle to find things to say. And the last sentence was easy as well. Thank you again for the socks.

Now, some commentators on Hebrews argue that our author in this chapter has got to thank you again for the socks. Even good commentators say, a ragbag, a ragbag of exhortations, a few ideas thrown in without any real pattern or structure.

It's amazing. In a letter as powerfully organized and as pointed as this, that at the end, the author should get rather bored and think, oh, I'd better say something about marriage.

[6 : 45] I'd better say something about hospitality. And throw in a few things to the mixture. That's, I don't accept that at all. This chapter is a worthy conclusion to this magnificent and tremendous letter.

Two things. First of all, these are practicalities to make sure that the word has really changed us. Previous passage, which we looked at a few weeks ago, was that splendid rhetorical passage about coming to the great mountain Sinai and Zion and standing in face of the blazing holiness of God.

Offer to God, acceptable worship for our God is a consuming fire. Now, it's very easy to be moved by Scripture. It's very easy to be inspired.

It's very easy to enjoy hymns and feel emotionally moved. And then, the minute we leave, it disappears. We're hardly at the door when the effect has dissipated.

We need continual engagement with the word of God. We need to make sure that the things we sing here with our lips, we mean in our hearts and carry out in our lives.

[8 : 00] That's what our author is doing here. He's saying, yes, our God is a consuming fire. What does that mean? It means, of course, we tremble before him. What does that mean on Monday? What does it mean on Wednesday?

What does it mean in our lives? And the second thing, it seems to me the whole theme of the letter is crystallized in verse 8. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

This great verse, which in many ways sums up the letter. After all, if he was the same yesterday, not just our yesterdays, but the whole yesterday of his people, the rituals, the sacrifices, the old covenants, which he said, don't go back to, nevertheless, were genuine.

As Rupert has pointed out more than once in his sermons on Hosea, Hosea and the other prophets were not presenting an Old Testament gospel.

They were presenting the gospel, which is finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the same in the present of the readers in the first century, and he is the same in our present, and he is the same forever.

[9 : 15] Notice not tomorrow. Tomorrow soon passes, and becomes yesterday. He is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. And that's why, he says in verse 22, I have written to you only briefly, or more exactly, I have written you only a short letter.

Undoubtedly, texting, emails, and other electronic media have destroyed the art of letter writing. But I think if we had written a letter as long as a letter to the Hebrews, we would feel we'd done justice to our subject.

Don't you see the point? The subject is too vast to do justice to, even a letter as long and powerful as this. Once again, I'm reminded of words that John uses the very last verse of his gospel.

Jesus did many other things, which if it were written, the world itself would not contain the books. Now, don't interpret that kind of pedantic literalism of books upon books piled up across the whole surface of the globe.

What John and our author here is saying, we will never come to an end of who Christ is. We will never exhaust him. We will never, throughout all years of eternity, we will never come to the end because this is a story which never ends.

[10 : 32] So this is no, this is no rag bag and thank you again for the socks. This is a powerful summing up of the themes of the letter. And with that in mind, let's see how the chapter develops.

And first of all, verses 1 to 6, our author says, love is not to be confined to people we know. Now, that flows from the letter.

The letter has been about God's abundant grace to the last, the least, and the lost. No one outside the limits of his love. And just as God's love in Christ knows no bounds, then his people are urged.

Verse, already in chapter 6, verse 10, he said, the love you showed for his sake. And in 1024, we are told to stir up more exactly to provoke one another to love and good works.

This is shown in a number of ways here. First of all, practical care for those both inside and outside the fellowship. Notice the word continue.

[11 : 41] This carries on the great theme of perseverance. Persevere in this, it's not easy. I mean, after all, we don't naturally love everyone.

But that's not what we're being asked to do. We're being asked to show the grace of Christ. Remember, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

That's not just the model. That is inspiration. It's more than the inspiration. It's the only way in which it can possibly happen. And also, of course, care for those outside.

You'll notice just before we leave, let brotherly love continue. Our author is a very good pastor, isn't he? He's not saying you're not loving. He's saying continue.

In other words, he uses both encouragement and warning. We've noticed this throughout the letter.

[12 : 39] Also, care for those outside. Hospitality. Now, in the world of our author, inns are expensive and often dirty and dangerous.

They're still expensive, but they're not usually dirty and dangerous now. And probably, therefore, particularly, but not exclusively, referring to people who are traveling and have nowhere to live.

Paul urges this as well in the pastoral letters, that people should give hospitality to the traveling preachers of the day. The need is somewhere to stay.

Very likely, verse 2 refers to the instance in Genesis 18, where Abraham welcomes three strangers who turn out to be the Lord, and two of his angels.

Now, all of us here, I'm sure, have entertained people who have not turned out to be angels. We know that. And he's not saying, if you entertain people, you'll find out that they're angels.

[13 : 38] He's saying, you never know what's going to happen. And that's true. Caring for prisoners and other disadvantaged. Now, obvious as we've done in different ways according to circumstances.

Some people won't be able to do this very much. For others, this will be the main emphasis of their serving the Lord. Caring for those in prison, caring for the disadvantaged, helping people on the streets, and so on.

For others, they will do it in and how they can. And it's not something for broadcasting. It's not something for telling other people about.

This is something done out of love for the Lord, who one day will reward. So that's the first way in which love is shown. Now, verse 4 seems a rather abrupt transition.

She goes on to talk about the temptations of sex and money. But I think it carries on from body in verse 3.

[14 : 42] The body here, meaning both the body of believers and also the human body. Just very much the way Paul plays on the two meanings of the word in 1 Corinthians.

The temptation to indulge both in sex and in money. Once again, there's the Old Testament background. These are the seventh and the eighth commandments he's thinking about particularly.

Both things will hinder perseverance. Both things will cause us to become obsessed with ourselves. The love of money, of course, very much that's the phrase Paul uses as well.

money is not the root of all evil as it's often misquoted. What Paul says is the love of money is a root of every kind of evil.

That's what our author is saying here as well. Depending on it for happiness, depending on it for fulfillment, our author is very realistic. These temptations, after all, when you think of it, you think of the various scandals you hear about from time to time, unpromnant people, or others for that matter, sex and money, these are the areas where the devil tempts, and often tempts so successfully.

[15 : 58] So he says, basically, love one another, love those outside the fellowship, don't indulge in straying from the faith in these practical ways, and he rounds off this section in verses 5 and 6 by saying, persevere because God is faithful.

Now that is such an important point. The whole tone of these exhortations is governed by that. It's not you ought to be entertaining people.

It's not you ought to be caring for this advantage. It's not you ought to be sexually pure. And not obsessed with money. What he is saying is that these things are right and they flow from the fact that God is faithful.

And there's two quotations once again. One applies specifically to Joshua, I will never leave you nor forsake you. And then the psalmist in Psalm 118 applies it to all of God's people.

I will never leave you nor forsake you, says God to Moses and then to Joshua. And Joshua is left worried and fearful as Moses was gone. And then to all God's people.

[17 : 19] So we can confidently say the Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me? I suspect most of us, certainly if I'm talking for myself, fear people an awful lot more than we fear God, don't we?

Our whole lives are often obsessed by it. What will so-and-so think? What will the reaction be? Now, I'm not saying we should be totally indifferent and ignore people's feelings.

I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that we need to fear God more than we fear people. Fear Him, you saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear, as one rather good hymn says.

Now, notice that without His help, we're going to pick a mess. Without His help, we're going to be unloving. Without His help, we're going to be inhospitable. Without His help, we're going to fall in sex and money and all other temptations.

But with Him, that help is available. And of course, it surely echoes the passage with which began the service, come with confidence to the throne of grace, to fear for we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with our weaknesses.

[18 : 35] Do you see what I mean when I say, this is not a ragbag, of exhortations, a summing up of the theme of the letter. Look to Him, eyes fixed on Jesus, which is what I call the whole series.

Having established that now, he goes on to the word which spans the generations, verses 7 to 19. The love which is not confined to people we know, and the word which spans the generations.

Now, I think there is, of course, a word play on word here. The word is Jesus Himself, the living word, and also, of course, the word of the gospel, which bears witness to Him.

And the first readers, like us, were only part of the great story which goes on forever, which every chapter is better than the one before.

You can guess who said that. And then the great verse 8, which can stand on its own, and often is taken on its own, and Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

[19 : 40] But like all texts, it's much better seen in context, is it not? And here, the first thing it's saying is leaders come and go, but the leader remains.

Remember your leaders. These almost certainly were former leaders, those who perhaps had now gone to be with the Lord, part of the great cloud of witnesses, or at least no longer active.

Now, there's a lot said in the New Testament about leaders, particular pastoral letters, 1 and 2, Timothy and Titus, have a great deal to say about leadership, what makes a godly leader.

Here, there is focus on one thing only, who spoke the word of God. You say to the author of Hebrews, what's a leader? Somebody who speaks the word of God.

Once again, not somebody who explains the Bible simply, but somebody who presents the living Christ of the Bible. That's their authority.

[20 : 46] That's what gave them their right to be heard. They're fallible people. All leaders are. But building up in the word is what produced a faithful and persevering people.

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you. I think that's very important. If a leader speaks the word of God, whatever else may be his faults, whatever else may be his limitations, then that person is a true leader.

If a leader does not speak the word of God, whatever his gifts, talents, and so personality, he is not a true leader. Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.

Not remember your leaders who were brilliant personalities, who knew all the biblical languages, who had done this and that, and who were entrepreneurs and all. Remember your leaders.

Why? Because they spoke the word of God. And those of us who are looking perhaps to be leaders among God's people in days to come, this is what it's about.

[21 : 57] At the one time, this happens a number of years ago, at an end-of-term service at a theological training center, a distinguished preacher, I can't remember who it was, was asking the question, what makes a true leader?

What makes a true Christian minister? He talked about all the things that didn't. It's not about, it's not about committees. It's not about being a nice person who visits all the time.

It's not about this, it's not about that. He says, well, what is it about? He says, tell them about Jesus. Tell them about the wonderful things he's done for you.

That's what it's about. And that's what it is about. Tell them about Jesus. So, the leaders who spoke the word of God to you, and he's saying, don't go back because everything has been fulfilled in him.

This is verses 9 to 15. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings. Now, he particularly emphasizes food here, kind of issues that arise in other parts of the New Testament, in Acts and in Galatians.

[23 : 13] Do Gentile converts need to follow the Jewish food laws, and so on? And Paul talks about in Romans 14 and 15. Now, you see, like sex and money, food is a tangible and obvious thing.

And Paul is saying, eating and drinking are not what it's about. As Paul says in Romans 14 or 15, the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but about righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

it. And that's what our author is saying here. Notice, it's good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by food. That's the point. The gospel of grace will say, don't go back from the cross.

Don't try and find something behind that. We have an altar, verse 10. And the altar here is the cross, which sums up all the sacrifices of the past.

Where Jesus died on the cross, where he went out and particularly in verse 12, he suffered outside the gate.

[24 : 26] On the great day of atonement, there were two goats, one of which was killed, symbolizing Christ's death, the other one sent out in the desert, showing Christ taking our sins away into darkness.

And so it is here. He died outside the sacred place enclosure, so that all could come to him. You are found, and every place is hallowed ground, said the hymn writer and poet William Cooper.

He died outside the camp, outside the sacred enclosure, so that his grace flows to the whole world. Oh, that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace, as Wesley sang.

But notice, it's not just about leaving somewhere, it's about going somewhere. Verse 13, Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp, bear the reproach, he endureth.

Now, Willie was talking about that this morning, about the hostility, that very often Christians endure. But it's going somewhere as well, not just leaving the camp, but going to the eternal city, which has been a great theme throughout the earlier part of the letter.

[25 : 46] Don't go back. These things were valid in their day, but they were valid because they pointed to Christ himself. And all this leads to a generous and open spirit.

Verse 16, Do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God, and here he's quoting from Hosea, about the sacrifice of praise.

So, you see how the argument's developing. We have Christ. This is the last days, as he says in chapter one. We have Christ, the great high priest, Christ, the Savior, Christ, the Lord.

Because of him, we don't go back because there is nothing to go back to because he's fulfilled it all. And he rounds off this section once again returning to leaders in verses 17 to 18.

Now, while the early reference was to past leaders, this reference is certainly to present leaders. Remember, obey your leaders and submit to them.

[26 : 58] Now, you can see how this whole section hangs together. Don't be carried away by false teaching. Your leaders spoke the word of God to you, and now here they're still doing. They watch for your souls.

That is the way in which leaders guard the souls of the people who have been committed to their care. Keeping watch over yourself.

Under the great shepherd of the sheep, who is going to be mentioned in verse 20. It may well be, and verse 18 may imply, that the author himself is one of their leaders.

We don't know, and we don't know where he was, we don't know why he was absent from them, but he's anxious to return. It seems to be quite likely that the author, whoever he may have been, still don't know the end of the series anymore in the beginning who he was, but nevertheless he has shown his leadership while away by writing this letter.

It's the closest thing incidentally in the New Testament to a sermon because he is expounding scripture most of the way through. He certainly spoke the word of God to them.

[28 : 09] Now, generally speaking, throughout the history of the church, there have been two extreme attitudes towards leaders. One is to denigrate them, to criticize them continually and say they can get nothing right.

The other is the opposite, to idolize them, put them on a pedestal that no human being can possibly be expected to stand on. And human nature in its perversity, very often you find the two attitudes together.

You ought to be on a pedestal. We'll make sure we kick you off it. Now, that is not our author. If we listen to what our author is saying, our author is saying, obey your leaders.

Remember, he's defined a leader. Your leader is someone who brings you the word of God. Respect them for it. Obey that word and honor them because they are keeping watch over your souls.

See how balanced this man is. As I say, he may have been a leader himself. We don't know. So, in this chapter then, first of all, he's told us about the love.

[29 : 25] It's not confined to those we know. Secondly, he's told us about the word which spans the generations. And finally, in the third section, verses 20 to 25, he talks about the praising heart.

And he breaks into this magnificent doxology. Now may the God of peace be brought again from the dead, our Lord Jesus. And if you've noticed, throughout the Bible, the authors are continually bursting into poetry.

Not just in books like the Psalms, but over and over again, the authors, moved by the Holy Spirit, moved deeply by the wonder of the gospel, burst into song.

This is so characteristic of the gospel, isn't it? Bursting into song, praising. So what we believe in is something we express in praise.

It's no accident, is it? Surely, when John Wesley was powerfully preaching the gospel, his brother was writing some of the splendid hymns we still sing. And every time when God moves the hearts of his people, it tends to be a groundswell of praise and of worship.

[30 : 40] And here we have this doxology, so many of these throughout the New Testament, indeed the Old Testament. God who brings peace to all eternity, the God of peace, peace in this world, but perfect peace in the world to come.

How does he bring this? Through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep. Now this shepherd image is rooted deeply in the Bible.

First of all, used way back in Genesis 40 by Jacob. Jacob, towards the end of his life, says, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long until this day.

Psalms 23, many other passages as well. Isaiah 40, he will guard, carry his flock like a shepherd and carry the little ones in his arms.

John 10, of the good shepherd. Now this image has not been used so far in the letter, but it gathers up many of the other images. This shepherd is the great high priest who has gone into heaven.

[31 : 50] This shepherd is the one who loved us and gave himself for us through the blood of the eternal covenant. See how that picks up Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever.

The new covenant and the eternal covenant, as far as I can see, are used interchangeably in the great prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and other, and Jeremiah, using that, the new covenant is the way in which permanently and finally through Jesus Christ, yesterday and today and forever, equip you with everything good that you may do his will.

Now, if we stop there, we might get nervous, mightn't we? How are we going to keep it up? But notice, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight.

This is inward transformation. We are going to be able to do good works if we do them at all because of inward transformation, which shows itself, admittedly and perfectly, in outward behavior.

So this glorious doxology forever and ever, amen. That would be a glorious place for the letter to have ended, wouldn't it? Sure, if we had been writing letters, that is a great rhetorical passage to end, and a great purple passage, then we can sing our hymn.

[33 : 10] But he doesn't. He does exactly now at the end what he has done at the beginning of the chapter. Once again, the author realized we're not yet there. We haven't yet reached the homeland.

There are still things that need to be attended to on the journey. And this verse 23, it seems very downbeat, really is about care for the worldwide church.

Our brother Timothy, probably the well-known associate of Paul, but not certainly because that was a common name in New Testament times. We don't know.

And then those who came from Italy send you greetings. Possibly could mean that the letter was written to Christians in Rome. We don't know.

That doesn't really matter. The important thing is there is this sense of caring for the worldwide church. An individual who has been released, been in prison, and also more widely God's people.

[34 : 15] The sense of the worldwide fellowship. And that's something that the Bible continually emphasizes. After all, right from the very early chapters, the Bible is a gospel for the whole world.

So, instead of ending through Jesus Christ, whom be glory forever and ever, amen, we have this rather downbeat, prosy thing about, remember, Timothy and those from Italy.

But you know, the letter does end on a high note. It could end on no higher. Verse 25, grace be with you all. What will keep them going until they reach the heavenly city?

What will keep us going? Grace. The grace of God. The grace which saved us. The grace which keeps us. And the grace which one day will present us in the Father's house.

So, although I said it was a downbeat ending, it certainly isn't. Grace is another, is almost a shorthand for the gospel itself.

[35 : 24] Our author is saying at the end, as he said at the beginning, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we pray that these glorious truths and their practical outworking will be built into our lives, that the glorious reality of the city to come and of the risen Lord who is already there, but alongside to help, will continue to shape our lives so that day by day we may indeed persevere and come rejoicing at the end with all your people into that city which you have prepared for those who love you.

Amen.