

4. Doing God's Will Together

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[0 : 00] We're going to read this on the back of our sheet. This is the last in a series on this great chapter, Hebrews 13. I've called this series, The Gospel Changes Everything, and we've looked at various ways in which that happens, particularly in our communal life, and today our particular subject is doing God's will together, and it's verses 20 to 25, but I want to read the whole chapter because we'll put it in context.

So Hebrews 13. 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 sexually 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.

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.

[1 : 25] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and 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 Jesus, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, 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.

[2 : 39] Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure 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, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. 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. Grace be with all of you. And that is the word of God, and may he bless it to our hearts and our minds.

This week, I had a very unusual experience. I received a handwritten letter. That doesn't happen often nowadays.

[4 : 00] It wasn't a particularly exciting letter, it has to be said, but the mere fact that it was a letter which someone had taken the trouble to write was actually very gratifying. In these days of emails and texting, the art of letter writing is probably dead.

I think I pointed out to you the first of this series, verse 22, I have written to you briefly, I have written to you only a short letter, strikes a rather odd note at the end of a letter, as long as the letter to the Hebrews.

We had written a letter as long as this. We would feel we had done justice, I think, to our subject. But it's the vastness of the subject that makes this a short letter. And the subject is that God has spoken fully, and finally and completely in his Son.

Nothing we can know of God, nothing we can receive from God, doesn't come through him. And in particular, his death, once for all, his sacrifice, to which nothing can be added, and which can never be repeated.

That is the great subject. And he, by that death, he not only provides forgiveness of sin, he has gone into heaven, to present our prayers and praises to the Father.

[5 : 16] And that's why we come now to this last of the series, looking especially at verses 20 and 21, although I won't ignore totally verses 22 to 25.

Another slightly odd thing is, verse 21 ends, Amen, and then the author goes on after that. But we'll look at that in a moment. There are three things I want to say.

First of all, what God has done. This is what the doc saw. Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead, our Lord Jesus. So what has God done in the covenant that he's given us?

First of all, he has made peace. He is the God of peace, who has made peace between himself and ourselves. Now if you ask people what the great problem in our world is, one of the things they will probably see is there is very little peace.

Communities are divided, nations are divided, families often divided, workplaces often divided, there is very little peace. Now that's true, but the Bible always tells us that the heart of that problem is because we are not at peace with God.

[6 : 30] If we are not at peace with God, we are not going to be at peace with each other. So that's why our author says, the God of peace. We are going to enjoy the blessings that come from him.

One of the greatest blessings is peace. He has made peace. This is related to God's character, the eternal covenant. It's not something that God did when he sent Jesus.

It's not that, it's not that throughout the Old Testament, he had a particular way of dealing with humanity, he then changed his mind. It was that by sending Jesus, he revealed the kind of God he is right from the beginning.

It's an eternal covenant, right from the beginning. As someone once said, before ever there was a sinner on earth, there was a saviour in heaven. God is a saviour right from the beginning.

And the coming of Jesus Christ, the final word, demonstrates that and seals that. That's the first thing that God has done. He has made peace. Peace, which is possible between him and us.

[7 : 35] And from that flows peace with each other. The second thing he's done is he has raised from the dead, he's brought again from the dead, our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep.

Back in chapter 2, the author has said that people were subject to slavery by the fear of death. And here is the answer to that.

The great shepherd of the sheep who has been brought again from the dead. Remember throughout this chapter, we've seen it in the last two weeks, that the leaders of the community, both the past leaders, back in verse 7, remember your leaders, and the current leaders, obey your leaders and submit to them.

They are leaders because they follow the great shepherd, Jesus Christ, verse 8, who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

And that means that the peace is not simply a temporary thing. It's not primarily a feeling. It's not primarily us feeling good about ourselves or about the world.

[8 : 39] It's something that is given through the blood of the eternal covenant. So what God has done means that nothing can prevent our salvation being completed.

And once again, back in 2 verse 14, he said that Jesus shared in our humanity so that by death he might destroy him who has the power of death.

His resurrection has struck at our most deadly fears, fear of death itself, the uncertainty about the future. So what has God done? God has made peace because he is the God of peace, and he is guaranteed that by raising Jesus from the dead.

But secondly, what is God doing? Verse 21, equip you with every good work, everything good, that you may do his will working in us, that is which is pleasing in his sight.

Now, in chapters 11 and 12, the Christian life has been seen as a pilgrimage of faith. beginning right back in the grey dawn of history with people like Abel and Noah and Enoch and so on. [9 : 53] And it's a journey to go onwards and upwards. And how does this happen? What is God doing at the moment? He is equipping us with everything good.

Now, what does that mean? Does that mean God is giving us all a healthy bank balance? Does that mean God is giving us all a nice house to live in?

Does that mean God is taking away all our problems and all our difficulties? Now, clearly, it does not mean that. It's rather like what Paul says in Romans 8, that everything works together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

If we want to understand the word good, we must go back to the beginnings of our Bibles. Remember in Genesis 1 and 2, God created and everything was good and sometimes very good. And to be good is something which fulfills the purpose for which God created it. So when God sends good, what God is doing is he is making us more and more like his son.

[11 : 02] That is what good ultimately means. That one day we will stand before him, totally the people he created us to be. We are not like that now.

There are a lot of rough edges to be knocked off, a lot of idiosyncrasies, bad habits, all sorts of things which are not good. But God is going to equip us with everything good.

And it seems to me that the way he equips us, part of the way he equips us, is by, obviously, the scriptures themselves. this letter.

And notice, remember back in verse 7, remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. The word of God used by the spirit of God to build into our lives those things which will make us fit for God's purpose, fit to stand before him.

That's what leadership means in this letter. And that's referred to, it seems to me, again in verse 23, you know our brother Timothy, has been released, the sense of part being part of the worldwide church.

[12 : 13] Those who come from Italy send your greetings and so on. This sense that what God is doing is something that is big, something that is vast, something that's on an international and an eternal scale.

So, as we live through the circumstances of our life, God is working for good, often not experienced as good, often experienced as heartbreak, as difficulty, as tragedy, as sadness.

But this is the guarantee that God is working for good. He will finish what he began. That's the first thing he's doing. He's equipping us with everything that is good.

And secondly, he is equipping us with everything good that we may do his will working in us that which is pleasing in his sight. Now, notice the two sides here.

There is the human side that you may do his will. There used to be a saying around in Christian circles, I'm glad I don't hear it very much now, that the Christian life was let go and let God.

[13 : 20] In other words, the Christian character comes by a kind of process of osmosis as we do nothing. That's not biblical. No, to do his will is something active, something positive, something we work out in our lives.

Does that mean the gospel of good works? Of course not, because we've got the other side working in us that which is pleasing in his sight. We do God's will not to earn his favour but because God is at work in us.

That's so important for us all. If you're not yet a Christian, if you wonder, one of the things that prevents people becoming Christian is they say, can I possibly keep this up?

Will I be able to live up to that standard? I've got good news for you. The answer to that question is no. Of course you can't. But the good news is that God is at work in us.

And that when God is at work in us, then he gradually forms in us the increasing capacity to do his will. And to do God's will is something that requires faith.

[14 : 33] As chapter 11 says, we walk by faith. God doesn't give us a blueprint and say, now next year you're going to do this, the year after you're going to do that. Daily, hourly, as we live in the presence of God, as we read his word, as we listen to the leaders who speak the word of God and so on.

And all of this needs the spirit of God at work in us. So what is God doing? God is at work in us. In order that we may do his will working in us, that which is pleasing in his sight.

We've got to have both things in balance. If we emphasize our sight, then one of two things will happen. We'll either become totally discouraged as we discover we can't do God's will or become extremely complacent if we think we're doing rather well.

On the other hand, if we totally emphasize God's part and see no response necessary, then we'll get back to that let go and let God attitude. What I said at the beginning when I began this series, the essence of covenant is that God commits himself totally and unconditionally to us in love. But for us to benefit from that love, we need to respond. Covenant is essentially a marriage relationship. It would be an odd marriage if the day you were married you said to your spouse, well, glad to have met you, maybe see you again sometime.

[16:00] You'd still be married, but you wouldn't be living in the benefits and in the light of that covenant. So, what has God done? He's made peace, he's raised Jesus from the dead.

What is he doing? He's working in us so that we do his will. And finally, what will God do? Working us through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Through Jesus Christ. There are no blessings that God has to give us. No prizes, if you like, no benefits that come any other way.

you cannot drive a ring road around Calvary and still meet God. No blessings God has come any other way.

We begin with him, we continue with him, and the goal is to be completely like him. Every blessing comes through Jesus Christ, who remember is God's final revelation, final word, final statement to the world.

[17:08] And notice, to whom be glory forever and ever. What does glory mean? Glory means the blinding light of God's reality, in which everything else is shown up for what it is.

But notice the last verse of all, grace be with you all. Glory is the reality to which we are going, but grace is the reality which brings us to it.

So as we finish this chapter, think about this wonderful gospel, the gospel of the covenant, the gospel where God fully, finally, and completely speaks in his Son.

The same God who spoke through the prophets, that's the whole of the Old Testament, to whom, who are pointing to the final revelation in his Son. The revelation that's appropriated for us when we come to him by faith, that's lived out by the life of faith through all the ages, through all the generations.

And notice how it ends up with grace. Grace is the great gospel word. Grace gives us what we don't deserve. Grace makes us what we can never be ourselves.

[18:28] And grace is, this is where, I like John Henry Newman's great hymn, Praise to the Holiest in the Heights. But he gets it so wrong in one of the verses. A higher gift than grace should flesh and blood refine God's presence and his very self.

There is no higher gift than grace. Grace is God's presence and his very self. And that's what the author of Hebrews is wishing to his readers and to us today.

Grace, God revealed in Jesus Christ. Be with us all. And that is a gospel worth believing, worth living in, worth pressing on to receive its full fullness in heaven.

Let's pray. Father, we praise you for the covenant, that covenant that we had no hand in making but could only receive by the empty hands of faith.

We praise you for your grace which makes us what we can never become ourselves and for the glory to which you have called us. And pray that as we continue our lives in this world, that these great thoughts will inspire our hearts and will fill our minds.

[19:39] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Just before you go, one quick notice and that is it's lovely to see you all here today and those of you who are downstairs too.

But I do hope that we won't see you here next week and that is because I hope you'll all be down the road in Buchanan Street at our first Wednesday service back in our refurbished building. So don't come here next Wednesday lunchtime but do come down there and it'll be great to see you. If you've got friends and perhaps work colleagues who've just been struggling to come to the service since it's been up here in Bath Street, perhaps they're just a bit further away from their work and they just haven't had time, do tell them please that we're back in Buchanan Street and maybe they'll be able to come again.

We're still going to be serving lunches and you'll be able to get lunch before or after the service. So from half past twelve we'll be serving lunches down in the new lower ground floor, that's the bit that

was never there before, underneath where you used to sit and stand.

It's called the wind. If you want to know why it's called the wind then you'll have to go down there and read the plaque on the wall, it'll tell you all about it. But you'll be able to get lunch down there, you'll also be able to go and buy coffee if you want to do that and just sit, there's tables there and so on.

[20 : 56] After the service there'll also be lunch available down there or we'll have a trolley upstairs for those who are in a rush and want to just grab a quick sandwich and talk to somebody for two minutes and then shoot back to work or whatever it is you're doing.

So if you want to come early and have lunch that'll be great from half past twelve but you'll be able to grab a sandwich and drink and so on afterwards too. If you're able to come early it'll be good, I'm sure you want to have a little look around the place, the church will be open from ten in the morning every day so you'll be able to come and do that.

But do be praying for us particularly. We're having our first services back at the congregation on Sunday and there's quite a bit of work still to be done. It seems no matter when you set the date there's always last minute things to be done.

I suspect we should be up very late on Saturday night. So we're all working very hard this week and we'd value your prayers particularly for Sunday but also for a new beginning for us as a congregation both on Sunday and on Wednesdays here that the Lord would use this new opportunity that we have in the beautifully refurbished building and practically refurbished building so that we can honour him and make his name known in the city.

So do come and see us next week, bring your friends and do be praying for us if you would also. Great to see you and we hope to see you not here but down the way next week.