

Hebrews 1.1-13.25 in Retrospect (Pt.1 Exhortation)

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Hebrews 1:1-4, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 13:20-25, <sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. <sup>23</sup> You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. <sup>24</sup> Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. <sup>25</sup> Grace be with all of you.

### Introduction

We are going to spend a few weeks looking back over the book of Hebrews now that we have covered every paragraph unit by unit. I can say without hesitation that the journey through this book has been very challenging, to be sure, but extremely profitable. Most of you have reported the same thing. So, how can we look back and gather our thoughts? We have to highlight; we have to be selective. We want to meditate on the major things, and to do that in three messages, I plan to cover these topics: exhortation, surprise, and Jesus. The third message will be a communion message, remembering *Jesus* from the book of Hebrews. Next week we will cover some *surprises* in the book. Today, the theme for our review of the book is *exhortation*.

We know that the entire book of Hebrews is an exhortation from 13.22: **I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.** It is brief. Although you might think that it is anything but brief. I wonder what overall impression you take away from reading through the book. When you read through a number of paragraphs, does it seem long? Actually, reading out loud at average speed takes about an hour for all thirteen chapters. Still, the book may seem to be anything but brief because it has plenty of long sentences and some truly difficult argument structure. The book may not be long in volume, but it is dense in its brevity; and that means it takes longer to cover some sections than it takes to cover other sections. As they say, reading is one thing and comprehending is another.

Thinking through the book as a whole, we need to think a certain way about Hebrews. Namely, we need to be mindful that the book is an exhortation. The entire letter is pastoral exhortation put down in writing. It is a sermon writ large. If we keep that in mind, it will help us bear with the pastor's appeal for patience and obedience.

To get into this retrospect on the book with an accent on exhortation, it will be helpful to cover these two things: 1) the teachings ground the exhortations; 2) the exhortations reveal the richness of the exhortation.

#### 1A. The teachings of the book ground the exhortations

How can we work our way from the many exhortations, many what we might call "mini-exhortations" to the single maximal exhortation? We begin with this question because the exhortations seem like fragments. Part of the sense of fragmentation is due to the way *the exhortations appear to interrupt the instruction*. You may tend to view the exhortations as

asides, unnecessary and even distracting. Of course, the fundamental flaw here is that this view misses the fact that the instruction *is* exhortative because the letter is exhortation (13.22: **bear with my [brief] word of exhortation**). We are reading it wrongly, if we think that the development of various topics is pure instruction. We are wrong, if we miss the point that the explanations of OT fulfillment are exhortation. We must recognize that the explanations are so tied to the exhortations that they *are* exhortation; they are part of the same cloth and the cloth is exhortation. We have to eliminate the idea of exhortations as minor side dishes with instruction as the main dish. The main dish, the entire feast, is exhortation; all the instruction is practical and oriented to exhortation.

This orientation is easy to see in the use of the word “therefore.” Two examples make this point clear. The teaching at the very beginning of the book that God has spoken and Jesus is His speech (1.1-2) and that Jesus sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high after making purification for sins (1.3), so that He, the incarnate Son of God, became superior to the angels (1.4-14) tightly grounds the exhortation that the first therefore indicates: **Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it** (2.1). Another example is the explanation regarding priests under the Levitical structure in contrast with our Lord’s priesthood: **For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. <sup>2</sup> He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness** (5.1-2). But Jesus is not of that order with its weakness; He is of the order of Melchizedek **<sup>6</sup> You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek** (5.6) because of the resurrection by God’s appointment: **So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”** (5.5). This explanation is part of the exhortation in 6.1, being foundational to it: **Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity**. Because Jesus is not governed by weakness but was appointed by God by the resurrection to be a priest forever, therefore go on to maturity in your Christian walk.

This way of viewing various subsets of instruction in relation to the many exhortations is a step toward understanding the book as exhortation.

Next, we must tackle the fact that to all appearances there are many different exhortations, while the writer wants us to consider the letter in its unity as an exhortation, not a series of exhortations. How can we work our way into a good grasp of things in this way?

2A. The exhortations (plural) of the book reveal the richness of the exhortation (singular)

They show the rich character of the single exhortation that is the book of Hebrews. The exhortation has the richness of many exhortations. We may call them all mini-exhortations or sub-exhortations of the exhortation, which is the entire book.

We can capture some important considerations about the many exhortations that are one by asking and answering the following question: how do the exhortations melt into a single exhortation? A few simple steps will give us the answer.

1) Step one: the exhortations overlap and accumulate through the book

Try to imagine the exhortations in the whole letter like points on a line that are centers of elliptical or egg-shaped circles, and the circles overlap.

For example, consider the first exhortation in 2.1 again: **therefore we must pay much closer attention**. In 2.2-4, reasons are given for this exhortation (**<sup>2</sup> For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard...**).

But the reasons for 2.1 also reach back to chapter 1 (1.1-14) because that is where the “therefore” directs us; “for” (2.2) points forward and “therefore” (2.1) points backward.

What happens with the second exhortation of 3.1 (**Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession**)? It looks ahead to 3.2-6: note how the author has us consider Jesus as ...**faithful to him who appointed him, v.2 ...counted worthy of more glory than Moses, v.3 ... faithful over God's house as a son, v.6**. Then it reaches back to chapters 1 *and* 2 [(to 2.5-18, to 2.2-4 in overlap with the basis of the first exhortation, and it reaches all the way back to chapter 1 (1.1-14)] because it calls us to consider “**Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession**” (3.1). Being an apostle, locks us into the fact that our Lord is both God’s speech (**God spoke...by His Son**, 1.1) and the preacher/apostle that underlies the apostolic preaching (the apostles attested to the word of salvation “**declared at first by the Lord**”, 2.3). That He is high priest harkens back to 1.3, **After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**.

Thus, the first exhortation as a point on a line has its basis on both sides of the point in 2.1 (back to 1.1 and ahead in 2.2-4). The second exhortation as a point on a line has its basis on both sides of the point in 3.1 (back to chapters 1&2: 2.2-4; 2.5-18 and 1.1-14, then ahead in 3.2-6). It overlaps with 2.1 and reaches back to 1.1. Accordingly, the exhortations are not discrete. The important lesson here is that they are not isolated units that we are to understand on their own terms as small separate circles. It much richer and more complex than that: the circles of context that ground each exhortation overlap and build upon each other as we move through the book (Likewise, the exhortation to hold fast our confession (4.14) has its ground partly in the fact that Jesus is a great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4.14), which takes us back to the reference to our Lord’s ascent to heaven, the specific point in 1.3b: After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.) Therefore, by overlap and by accumulation, the exhortations of the book actually melt together into a unified whole or a single piece of cloth.

Thus, a way of meditating on the exhortations in the book of Hebrews is to take them one by one and read back and ahead looking for the overlap that grounds each exhortation; you do not need the precision of a literary scientist to do this profitably; you simply need the prayerful concentration of a disciple who meditates with thankful love for the Lord Jesus.

2) Step two: the overlapping exhortations have two center points

Let me identify them with some comments. They are: 4.11 and 12.1.

**Hebrews 4:11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest**

**Hebrews 12:1 Therefore... let us run...the race that is set before us**

To make a long story short, the reason for this identification (which is rough and ready) is that each of these exhortations includes all the mini-exhortations that come before it and after it. Thus, on this basis, the outline of the book has two sections 1-10 and 11-13. Notably, the two circles meet at 10.39, **we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls**. This verse is transitional picking up the warnings (the serious exhortations) of the previous sections in chapters 1-10 (the warnings about shrinking back and being destroyed by apostasy) and anticipating the promises (the assuring and promise-laden exhortations) of the following sections in chapters 11-13.

Thus, we have two images of the Christian journey: *we travel through the wilderness to the heavenly Canaan* (to where Jesus is at the right hand of the Father having passed through the heavens) and *we run a race from here to the city of God*, to the city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God. The two broad exhortations are “strive to enter eternal Sabbath” and “run your race to the finish line in glory.”

Accordingly, everything else hangs on these two reference points that function like two large hooks with everything hanging on one or the other. On one hand, how do you strive to

enter the eternal Sabbath? Follow me in the book as I answer this question, so, turn to chapter 2. You do so by paying close attention to the gospel that Jesus gave as the incarnate Son described in chapter 1 as greater than angels (2.1, **pay much closer attention to what we [you] have heard, lest we [you] drift away from it**). You do so by considering Jesus, the faithful apostle and high priest (3.1, **Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, <sup>2</sup> who was faithful**), by exhorting one another (3.12-13, **<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**), by holding fast and drawing near to the throne of grace (4.14-16, **<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God...<sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**). You do so by going beyond the basics to transcend them going beyond dullness to maturity (6, 1, **Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity**), with resolute confession (10.21-23, **since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful**), and by stirring up love and good deeds (10.24-25, **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near**).

On the other hand, how do you run the race of your life? You run by faith of course from all of chapter 11. But run by faith, he exhorts, on the path of peace and holiness (12.12-14, **Hebrews 12:12-14, <sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord**). You will recall that you run on the pathway of holiness by receiving discipline from your Lord (12.5-11); discipline just drops in here seemingly out of no where, but it is part of the running lane. Most important: run with your eyes fixed on Jesus (12.2) in a feast of grateful worship (12.25-29; 13.10-16) with abiding brotherly love (13.1-3) and with the right perspectives on marriage, money, and pastoral care (13.4-19), as you learn and live by benediction and doxology (13.20-25).

So far then, we can see how the exhortations make up a single exhortation by noting how they overlap and by noting how they all hang together on two hooks.

3) Step three: the two main exhortations blend together in the journey theme

“Strive to enter” and “run the race” are a single exhortation in the use of different images. They speak *about the Christian journey to final rest when we reach the goal line of the heavenly Canaan*. In one word, the book of Hebrews can be summed up in this command: “persevere.” Thus, he exhorts you to persevere in the race of obedient faith through the wilderness to the city of God. You are to do this, he says, by closely considering Jesus and the gospel that He gave you, by drawing near to Him to go beyond the basics to maturity, by stirring up love and good deeds on the path of holiness in a life of grateful worship. There is the book of Hebrews in a nutshell.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude with some comments about the gospel, faith, and worship.

### 1) Gospel

This pastoral sermon is a substantial call to duty; there is fullness and rich diversity in the exhortations that make up the single unified exhortation. Now it is important to note that the writer is emphatic in telling us that the duties that make up the duty of the Christian are critically necessary to be sure *but not in a way that means that you are on your own or that the outcome*

*depends on you ultimately.* That would involve self-righteousness, which is bad news. This exhortation is gospel! It has its roots sunk deep in the efficacious work of Christ as a perfect, great, high priest. This fact is what makes the exhortation a piece of gospel-good-news.

The summary text is 12.2 that tells you to run **looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** Because Jesus is the author and finisher of your faith, then you will finish the race of your life. Jesus will see to it that you reach the final goal. You must run the race and you will run it to the finish line because Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. That is part of what it means for Him to be your great high priest and great shepherd.

## 2) Faith

The call to faith is in the call to consider Jesus (3.1) and to fix your gaze on Him (12.2). So, we can summarize in this way: “the exhortation of this pastoral sermon writ large is this: consider Jesus, give yourself away to Him, entrust yourself to Him, and commit yourself to Him for obedience in pursuit of holiness.

## 3) Worship

If you look back at the book in terms of the exhortations that make up this exhortation, and if you do so in light of the power of your Lord’s sacrifice that guarantees your salvation through all time and circumstance, then what must stand out as most vital to your life per the book of Hebrews? Truly, there must be many ways to answer to this question because the good news of this book is like a diamond with many beautiful reflections. Because the book is exhortation and your fulfillment of this duty writ large rests on the shoulders of your Savior, then you must do what the angels are commanded to do, *worship the Son* to whom belongs all glory forever and ever, amen.”

**1.6: And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."**

**13. 20-21: 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,<sup>21</sup> 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.**