

Hebrews 1.1-13.25 in Retrospect (Pt.2 Surprises)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

Pastor Ostella

12-6-2009

Hebrews 12.22-29: ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken- that is, things that have been made- in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Introduction

For me, the book of Hebrews has been a book of surprises. Many unexpected things emerge when a squeezed accordion opens up to full view. You will recall that the squeezed accordion illustrates the brevity of this book that compresses so much into it. The author does this by using long sentences, tight reasoning, with overlapping material that reiterates things already treated while it adds new dimensions. We might say that the author seems at times to get ahead of himself; so, he circles back over the same line of thought to expand on it as he moves forward to his next point.

This way of unfolding his teaching leads to a number of surprising things. Right off the bat, it is surprising to discover that all the exhortations make up a single exhortation in two key images of traveling and running. The single exhortation of the entire book is to "persevere": persevere traveling through the wilderness to the heavenly Canaan, *and* persevere running the race of your life to the heavenly city. Something else I never anticipated is the importance of hospitality; it shines as an unexpected Christian virtue in the book of Hebrews, presented as it is in warm and powerful terms as the overcoming of strangeness (Hebrews 13:2 ² **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares;** Hebrews 13:24 ²⁴ **Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.** ²⁵ **Grace be with all of you.**)

In light of these examples, I wonder what surprised you over the course of your reflections on this pastoral-letter-sermon. What did you find that you did not expect? Well, in this retrospect part two, I want to spend some time reviewing three surprises. Perhaps, some of them strike you the same way that they strike me. They are: meaningful encouragement from fearful warnings, family love from priestly work, and extraordinary worship from ordinary means.

1A. Meaningful encouragement from fearful warnings

Notably, numerous warning passages characterize the book of Hebrews. Repeatedly, the author speaks of holding fast with the caution that his readers then and now will not enter heaven if they do not **hold fast firm to the end** (3.14). In this vein of thought, he says, **Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God** (3.12). It is unexpected to find this *emphasis*, namely, that some of the readers, those who make up the baptized community, may fall away and perish like the Israelites who provoked the Lord and fell short of the land of Canaan (Heb. 3:17, **And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?**). Thus, God's word to us in our time is the same that He addressed to them in their time: **Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion** (3.15). The author is surprisingly sharp in expressing the duty that we all have to hear and heed the warning of this text (and many like it).

But even more surprising is the fact that these warnings contain the sure and unchangeable word of God's promise that is rooted in the perfect work of the cross. Two passages (from many in the book) make this point clear.

1) In Hebrews 3.14, we have a text that directs our thoughts to God's promise.

He promises that His covenant children will in fact fulfill the duty to which this sermon-exhortation calls them: **For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.**

The nature of this conditional statement reveals the gospel in a balanced way. The "if" part of this sentence expresses a necessary condition related to having a saving share in Christ. Therefore, what this means becomes clear by moving the "if" to the beginning of the sentence (by reversing the implied "if...then"): if we have a share in Christ (as a fact from the past that continues in the present), then we will hold our original confidence firm to the end (of the race set before us per 12.1). Remarkably, surprisingly, the warning contains a sure promise that encourages us on the way. It is another way of saying that the author of our faith and confidence is also the finisher of our faith and confidence (12.1-2).

2) In Hebrews 10.14, we have the deep roots of God's promise.

This text puts the work of our great high priest underneath all the fearful warnings. Thus our continuing on the pathway is due to the sanctifying effectiveness of the cross that abides forever: **by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified** (Heb. 10.14). You will finish the race of your life; you must and you will. 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. If you are being sanctified by the Lord's working in your life, then you can be sure that He will continue that sanctifying work right up to your glorification because His offering perfected you *for all time* (Heb. 10.14): **And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified** (Rom. 8.30). It is a welcome surprise to find that the forceful warnings are meaningful encouragements. They are means by which God brings His people home to glory, surely, effectively, and safely home to glory.

2A. Family love from priestly work

I never anticipated the emphasis on one anothering Christian love that we find in the book of Hebrews. The pastor crystallizes this point so simply in 13.1: **Let brotherly love continue.**

For retrospect consider the following line of thought that takes us from the work of Christ in the center of everything in this book to a surprising emphasis on brotherly love. In chapter 2, we learn that Jesus loves His covenant children and thus came on mission to save them (because they partake of flesh and blood, he partook of the same, v. 14, to taste death for all of them, v. 9). Tasting death means far more than partaking of a small sample. It means to experience death by suffering. Look again at 2.9; it was **because of the suffering of death** that He was **crowned with glory and honor**. Jesus saves by being obedient and suffering in His death. Listen to His love for you from these words: **In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.** ⁸ **Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered** (5.7-8). By this love unto death, He makes you redeemed brothers and sisters. Therefore, if you grasp even an iota of this love, then you will work at cultivating love for one another.

Note how mutual love is a key to heeding the warnings of the book, like the point of an arrow. It is as if the pastor says, "I am putting an arrowhead on my calls to perseverance. They all come to this profoundly practical point: continue to let love flow like a river." The unexpected accent on family love is radically important in understanding the warnings of this book. So let me restate the significance. Active love for the Christian family is the hallmark of genuine, persevering Christian faith. A true Christian will put forth effort to "get outside of himself" and **Let brotherly love continue** (13.1).

Therefore, it is important, fundamentally important, that you recognize how it is that you stay in the running lane of peace and holiness: you do so by striving to show love to one another

in the Christian family. That is the holiness **without which no one will see the Lord (12.14)**. This is something to never forget; it is a goal to always pursue. It means to aim at, and make concrete progress in, self-sacrificing love, the kind God has shown to you in Christ. What remarkable love is this love that comes with abundance to you! It is undeserved and unconditional. True brotherly and sisterly love is not based on what you get from the object of your love, but is based on what you can give and how you can bring good to the one you love. **Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 Jn. 4.11)**. Can we ever overstate what Jesus commands when He says: **"love as I have loved you!"**? Well, I do not know about you, but for me this powerful call to family love with its roots set deep in the priestly work of Christ is a warm surprise.

3A. Extraordinary worship from ordinary means

It is surprising to find the high place that Hebrews gives to worship. Perhaps, like me, you knew ahead of time that chapter 10 calls us to the local assembly, but what you did not know was the fact that this book elevates worship in nothing short than an astounding way.

To see this, consider the details of your coming to Zion: **you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,** ²³ **and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,** ²⁴ **and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12.22-24)**. The author lists seven details that have some overlap between them. They are like seven reflections from a single diamond. We can tie them all together in the following sentence: "you have come to the church for worship by the gospel." That gives us three main points.

1B. You have come *to the church*

That the church is the subject here is clear from the fact that you have come to the assembly, to the city, and to the saints: **you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,** ²³ **and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,** (12.22-23). "To the assembly" is in v. 23; "to the city" is in v. 22; and "to the saints" is at the end of v. 23.

From Romans, you know that the Lord Jesus is the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8.29, **For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers**). So, the church is a family of firstborn brothers and sisters with Christ as the elder brother. Furthermore, coming to the church is to the city (**to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, 12.22**). This is a rich point. You have come to the city of the living God, the better country, a heavenly one, to the city of the Lamb who is the life and light of men: **the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb (Rev. 21.23)**. You have come to the church, which is the city of the living God. You have come to the church, the assembly of the redeemed, because you have come "to the saints" (that is, **to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 12.23**) and **to God, the judge of all (12.23)**. Therefore, you need not fear; you are to come boldly to the throne of grace to receive help in time of need (**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, Heb. 4.16**).

2B. Second, you have come to the church *for worship*

This is a marvel; you have come to a city of worship, to a worshipping city.

1) The worship is personal

Our pastor states this in very personal terms: you have come, he says, **to God... and to Jesus** to share in *personal* fellowship (12.23-24). You have access to the Father and Son: **indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 1.3)**.

2) The worship is joy-filled: you have come to **innumerable angels in festal gathering (12.22)**

Angels worship the Lord Jesus, you remember from chapter 1 (Heb. 1.6-7) and now the author tells us that **in festal gathering** they adore Him, which must mean they sing the new song they confess: **Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,** ¹² **saying with a loud voice [with loud joy-filled festal**

singing voices per Heb. 12.22], **"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"** (Rev. 5.11). Remarkably, Jesus sings in our midst when we sing (Heb. 2.12: Jesus says, **in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise**). How then can we be anything other than a singing church? We must sing because our singing Savior is the one who died in our place, enduring our death to give us His life. Therefore, if you ask, "where have I come" the answer is that you have come to the church for worship. One more simple point rounds off our picture of the mount Zion of prophetic metaphor: it is by the gospel.

3B. You have come to the church for worship *by the gospel*

We get this last idea on the list from 12.24b: **and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**. Both Abel and Christ endured death by violent means. Abel's death and blood speaks a word of ultimate judgment, but the death and blood of Christ speak gospel-good-news. Now we have the gospel word of the new and better covenant (not of vengeance but of gracious saving fulfillment). Thus, you have come to the preaching of the grace of God in the gospel, to preaching about the great high priest, your Melchizedek, who gave Himself a sacrifice for you in the suffering of death in your place, and who lives and intercedes for you in the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7.16). Where have you come thus far in the race of your life? You have to the church for worship by the gospel. It was unexpected but a truly welcome surprise in the book of Hebrews to discover the extraordinary character of local church worship through simple and ordinary means.

Conclusion

We can put the surprises about warnings, love, and worship together with a focus on worship. The fact that the strong warnings contain within them promises of God's efficacious grace is encouraging in a way that leads to gratitude and worship, and that worship is family worship. So, in conclusion, consider two interconnected things about worship: it is encouraging and it is astounding.

1) Worship is encouraging

As you run the race of your life *you have great encouragement* because of where you have come. You have come to the city with the throne of mercy, worshiping saints, and angels. You have come to the family of Christ. You have come there *now* in anticipation of what is outstanding in the not yet. It is to the church-city-family to which you already **have come** (12.22). Thus, in very practical terms, the writer has put a vision before your eyes to lift your hearts for the difficult steps of your pilgrimage. Marvelously, in this book of warnings, you have great encouragement to hold your confidence firm to the end. In these pages, you have huge motivation to grateful worship of your Lord and mutual love for your brothers and sisters.

2) Worship is astounding

Furthermore, think about the dignity, celebration, majesty, and the awesome privilege and astounding glory of local church worship in singing and preaching. In song and preached word, you fellowship in the assembly of the saints with God the Father and with His Son, our risen Lord Jesus Christ. This is so because of where you have come, namely, **to innumerable angels in festal gathering**. You have in these words an amazing elevation of gathering together as a little flock. Without question this is a place of sweet fellowship with God and Jesus.

Let us fall down before the majesty of our God in due acknowledgment of our need of Jesus as our mediator by His death and resurrection; may the Holy Spirit enable us to strive with great effort, with strenuous effort, to join with Christ in songs to His praise, to value the privilege of gathering to hear the gospel, and to stir up one another to love and good deeds. To the triune God be all glory forever and ever, amen.