

Benediction Par Excellence (Heb. 13.20-25)

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<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

Hebrews 13.20-25 is truly remarkable because it is a prayer and praise that is loaded with doctrine, eminently practical doctrine. What we have here is a “benediction *par excellence*.” It is a most excellent benediction combined with doxology. It reaches the heights of piety in worship while keeping the feet planted firmly on the earth.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the benediction extends to the end of the book. We know this from the bookend effect: the first bookend is **may...God...equip you** (13.20-21) and the second bookend is **grace be with all of you** (13.25). Thus, the things in between these bookends (the contents of 13.22-24) are not a mere postscript. They are postscriptive, but with an accent and punch. So, as we shall see, they are not merely some loose and unimportant side thoughts.

Regarding this most excellent benediction, the text gives us its firm ground, its core petition, and its warm appeals.

1A. The firm ground of the benediction

The benediction has a specific petition at its center, but before he gets to it (in v. 21) the pastor-writer presents the foundation on which his prayer rests. *It rests on God*. He thus grounds his prayer in three descriptions of God as the God of peace, the God of resurrection and the God of covenant: **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** (13.20). His firm ground is God as peace-giving, resurrection providing, and covenant keeping. We can discuss each of these in order.

1) We begin with this: the prayer is grounded in the peace-giving character of God.

His petition has this root: **Now may the God of peace...equip you** (20a, 21a). The peace in view is not the harmony of love that is vital in this book; it is not the composed attitude of an unwavering faith in the face of persecution. Instead, this is the deepest and fullest peace, namely, the peace of the gospel that heals the breach between man and God. It is the peace that the sacrifice of Jesus, His death on the cross, secured; we know this from the flow of thought that leads us to the blood of the covenant. In Christ, *the God of peace* brings restoration from the fall and thus reconciles sinners from their alienation. Of course, those who have reconciliation reflect the calm of peace with God and they work at loving, peaceful relationships with others.

2) Moreover, the prayer is grounded in the resurrection-providing power of God

The writer adds: **Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep ...equip you** (20b, 21a). It is an interesting fact that this is the only explicit mention of the resurrection of Jesus in the book of Hebrews. The word resurrection occurs twice but not in relation to our Lord (6.2; 11.35). In 11.19, we have record of Abraham’s belief that God would raise Isaac from the dead, which is defined as an anticipation of the resurrection of Christ: **from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back** (11.19). However, His status as resurrected Lord is clear and fundamental to His priestly work after the order of Melchizedek: **our Lord ...arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, <sup>16</sup> who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life** (7.14-16). His resurrection is presupposed in the fact that He is now a priest forever: **For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek"** (7.17). You will recall that being a priest forever in the power of an indestructible life makes Jesus **the guarantor of a better covenant** (7.22) because the former priests were prevented by death from continuing in office (7.23) but not so for our Lord. Indeed, **he holds**

his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever (7.24). That is why he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (7.25).

Thus, the writer grounds His approach to God in prayer in this gigantic fact that God brought our Lord Jesus from the dead. He brought Him back to life again from being a corpse. The fact of His death is cited numerous times in the book of Hebrews. Jesus died, He suffered in His dying, and He did so for His sheep. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The Good Shepherd is truly therefore, as our author puts it, **the great shepherd of the sheep** (13.20); His greatness on our behalf, as our shepherd, as my shepherd (**the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want**, Ps.23.1) is the part of the firm and solid ground of this outstanding benediction.

3) Finally, the prayer is grounded in the covenant-keeping purpose of God

He says, in a cumulative way, **Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the eternal covenant...equip you** (20c, 21a). The grammar of this sentence needs some clarification. To what are we to connect the phrase, by the eternal covenant? What is “by it? What is *by the covenant* and what makes it *eternal*?

The Greek word order indicates that it is by the blood of the eternal covenant that God raised Jesus from the dead (*Hebrews*, Hughes 589). It is fascinating that resurrection is the result of death! The point is that the God of peace brought Jesus to life from the dead *by the power that is in the blood* of the covenant. This is a first step in the wonder-working power of the blood. We can only understand this when we grasp the truth that in giving His blood, that is, in giving Himself as a sacrifice for His sheep in obedience to the purpose of God, His death accomplished all that was necessary to bring His sheep back from alienation to peace with God. Thus, because Jesus fulfilled all that was required of Him in the *pactum salutis* for His brothers and sisters (Heb. 2.11-13), on that account, God raised Him from the dead.

Now, what makes the covenant eternal? In what sense is the new and better covenant (of which Jesus is the guarantor) eternal? Clearly, the efficacy that flows from His death and into His resurrection makes Him the priest of His sheep in the power of an indestructible life and therefore He is our priest forever. In turn, this means that the triune God designed the cross as the place where the Son would experience the fullness of death in the place of His brothers and sisters by tasting death for everyone of them (Heb. 2.9-10). By His accomplished work, He satisfied the justice of God against them forever, so that the release from bondage to sin and death that they receive in their experience is eternal, an eternal redemption (Heb. 9.12) being applied by the eternal Spirit who was also active in His death and on the basis of His death *calls them* from darkness to light and guarantees the promise of eternal inheritance. This is so clear in Hebrews 9.14-15: <sup>14</sup> **how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.** <sup>15</sup> **Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them.** The ground of this prayer is the promise-keeping character of God.

What does “eternal” add to the notion of covenant and promise? Attached to salvation, redemption, judgment, and inheritance, “eternal” indicates the abiding result, outcome, and effect of what it describes. Thus, the eternal covenant refers to the abiding result, outcome and effects of the new covenant secured by the death of Christ as a sacrifice in the place of His sheep. As Calvin put it, the blood of Christ “brings forth fruit as if it were always flowing.” By giving His life for His sheep in accordance with His eternal purpose, Jesus gives them eternal life and no one can snatch them from His hand (Jn. 10.28). The good shepherd is truly the great shepherd because His bloody and painful death secured the Father’s strong arm of resurrection power in the resurrection of Jesus as the key to bringing us the sure promise of resurrection, eternal inheritance, and eternal Sabbath rest in the heavenly Canaan.

What then is the firm ground of this benediction? The unshakable foundation is the peace-giving, resurrection providing, and promise-keeping God of grace (13.25) to undeserving, helpless, and hopeless sinners.

## 2A. The core petition of the benediction

Based on the riches of such an eternal redemption by the blood that obtained the promises of the new and better covenant, the pastor prays that God may equip the flock. The core petition is for equipping in good works: <sup>20</sup> **Now may... God ... equip you with everything good that you may do his will** (13.20-21). At the core of this remarkable benediction is the prayer that the flock of God be equipped by the God of peace with everything good for the specific purpose that they may do His will.

The pastor seeks God's blessing on God's people so that they will be diligent, involved, and active in doing the will of God. The fact that he looks to God for this kind of blessing indicates already what he spells out more fully, namely, that **working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ** (13.21). Thus, the second bookend looks to God for grace: **Grace be with all of you**. In other words, may He be gracious to you (13.25).

Here is a powerful point: what we do is the doing of the Creator. He is working (literally doing) in us what pleases Him. Because His working has its locus in the death and resurrection of Christ, because as he says here, it is **through Jesus Christ**, then doxology rightly belongs to Him **forever and ever**, truly (**amen!**). The work of Christ secured the enablement we need to persevere. We must be equipped, we have work to do, and we have a race we must run. That is our duty if we have a share in His atoning work. Moreover, and this is gospel galore, we desperately need His enablement, and we have it for with eternally saving power He is **working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ** (13.21). He will keep us on the path all the way to glory. That is encouraging to know as we face the battles of our journey in the wilderness on the way to Canaan. We know and have encouragement in the fact that the end result does not depend on us because we are His workmanship created for good works that He ordained that we walk in them (Eph. 2.10; cf. Phil. 2.12). Hence, the doxology! Praise the Lord Jesus forever and ever because He is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12.1-3). The doxological benediction makes it clear that the severe warnings of the book of Hebrews are part of means by which God enables His people to persevere.

The core then of this profound benediction is the petition to the Lord that He equip His people with everything good so that they may actively and fervently do His will in light of the great promise that He will never leave them nor forsake them.

## 3A. The warm appeals of the benediction

There is warm urging in the pastoral appeals that surface within this fully packed benedictive prayer. Earnest entreaty governs all the items that at first seem separate and unimportant: <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** (13.22-24). These verses are not merely postscriptive (contrary to Hughes 588), but as we noted, they are part of an inclusio with 20 and 25 as bookends. Therefore, the appeal to bear with the brief exhortation, the mention of the release of Timothy, and the warm greetings are reinforced (strengthened, emphasized, highlighted) by the placement within this God-glorifying prayer. The prayerful glorifying of God thus attaches to things we are to believe and how we are to live what we believe. Thus, while offering a prayer and a doxology, the author exhorts and enhances His call to understand what he has written *and* implement it. It is all here condensed and squeezed into this benediction. There are three appeals.

### 1) Bear with the word

Patiently listen with self-restraint: **I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly** (13.22). Hold back as to a reactionary spirit; do not, I urge you, do not reject, dismiss, neglect or oppose my pastoral sermon put to writing in this short letter.

### 2) Welcome restoration

The resolution of hindrances of shepherding service lies behind these words: <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** (13.23-24a). So the appeal here is that the church is to welcome the removal of barriers that prevent a healthy giving and receiving of pastoral care.

### 3) Give and receive hospitality

The fundamental essence of hospitality is here in the idea of greeting: **Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings** (13.24). In the large context of the fall, when man distanced himself from God, he became a threat to his neighbor, as Cain lifted his knife against his brother Abel. Now, in Christ, remove the distance: give and receive hospitality.

## Conclusion

This benediction teaches.

### 1) The benediction teaches you what to believe (in summary of the entire epistle)

Just consider some of the doctrines it contains regarding peace, resurrection, covenant, perseverance in good works, and all these things guaranteed by the power of the blood. As the author compresses much into a small space in the brief letter/sermon, likewise, he compresses even more in the benediction so that it is loaded with instruction. At bottom, this prayer teaches you the truth of the efficacious work of the risen Lord Jesus as your great shepherd who laid down His life for you.

### 2) The benediction teaches how to believe

The author shows you how to believe these truths, namely, you are to believe these great doctrines in a doxological way; that means you are to believe them with doxology and praise in a dependent and humble way. Praise God from whom all these efficacious blessings flow; praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for these truths and the ability to see them by grace, amen.

### 3) The benediction teaches you how to pray

Moreover, this benediction teaches you to how to pray: you are to pray doctrinally.

Right praying will combine benediction with doxology in the expression of doctrine. The doctrines of sovereign effectual grace are matters that we ought to sound out in prayer to our Lord often with praise.

### 4) The benediction teaches you how to live what you learn and believe

Prayer for various things cultivates those things; it cultivates the right attitude toward them and implementation of them. There is a sanctifying dimension to prayer because talking things over with God shapes your attitude toward these things and affects your conduct regarding them. If you pray for your pastor, that will cultivate a good attitude and willingness toward pastoral instruction and exhortation. Prayer for strength in running the race that includes praise to God for His covenant keeping that guarantees your progress all the way to the finish line, drives you from your knees to actual heart-felt effort-filled running in your lane.

By the inclusio this benediction par excellence prompts you to do God's will, to make the best of pastoral ministry, and to give and receive hospitality in its fundamental form of the greeting since greetings are more than "hi and goodbye"; they advance the removal of distance and promote the elimination of strangeness in the fallen world of aliens from God and one another.

**Now may we fall down before the majesty of our Lord Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep, may the God of peace equip us with everything good so that we may do His will; may the Holy Spirit encourage us in knowing that He is working in us that which is pleasing to the triune God to whom be all glory forever and ever, amen.**