

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 49 March 19, 2023

Jesus: The Same Yesterday, and Today and Forever

Hebrews 13:7-14

Introduction

The author of Hebrews began the epilogue of chapter 13 (vv. 1-6) with practical exhortations to continue to exhibit brotherly love and moral/ethical practices with regard to hospitality, visiting prisoners & the mistreated, honouring marriage and not placing money in the position of an idol in our lives. The A.H. anchored these observances by quoting Scripture to remind us why we should be content with what we have – because Christ had died, and said, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* (Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Ps. 27:1). In the NT, Jesus also says similar words, conveying the same message in relation to evangelism – cf. Matt. 28:20, *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

We will see, when we look at v. 7, that he begins with a command to *“Remember your leaders,”* those who went before, and ends this section in v. 17, with *“Obey your leaders and submit to them...”*

The verse that stands out in this text is of course, v. 8, which almost seems out of place, as if it were inserted into the passage where its context seems hard to determine. But, as we’ll see, it is, in fact, the verse that anchors the author’s whole argument.

Our Christian Heritage

v. 7

Since the recipients of the letter are called on here to, *“Remember your leaders,”* but later on to *“Obey your leaders,”* the contrast is telling the recipients to remember leaders who are now no longer with them. So this is not a daily remembering as I long assumed, as in “remember your pastor in prayer,” but rather, “remember those who spoke (past tense) to you the Word of God.” Obviously, it is our relationship to God, to Christ that is most critical in our lives as believers, but of secondary importance (and by God’s sovereign providence - cf. Acts 17:24-27) is the example of Christian leaders, families, and friends in our past. Here, the focus is undoubtedly on past leaders.

Without too much memory exercise, all of us who are saved, even (or perhaps, especially) those of us who have served Christ for many years or decades, can easily recall the names, faces and conversations & perhaps even some sermons, Bible studies of those who led us to Christ, mentored us, taught us, pled with us to follow Christ and who loved us with their lives and service to Christ. In v. 7 here, the AH’s point is *“your leaders”* – so likely pastors, perhaps even apostles or their ambassadors, friends and church members who taught them doctrine and encouraged them in tough times.

It is obvious from sections of this letter and the whole tenor of it that this congregation was under serious strains of persecution for their faith, because some were considering returning to Judaism to escape that persecution. (cf. Heb. 2:1-4; 3:6, 12-14 and more)

It is likely that these leaders they were to remember were now gone, having passed away into the waiting arms of our beloved Saviour by some means – perhaps even martyrdom. But they had spoken to them *“the Word of God.”* Notice, in remembering them, *we are to “consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”* IOW, What lessons can we learn, even today, from what their lives taught us when they were with us – what is their legacy? What did they leave behind for us? Note the lyrics of “Find Us Faithful”, a song made popular by Steve Green many years ago.¹

When I read these words, I thought of the Apostle Paul and his final letter to Timothy (whom he had led to Christ, and mentored as he grew up) – note II Tim. 3:10-17. More specifically, like Paul exhorted people to imitate him – I Cor. 4:14-17; 11:1. So, just as the A.H. here in Heb. 13:7, Paul’s aim was not only to teach them the Bible, but to implore them to imitate his life, because what we believe must match up with how we live our lives, otherwise, we are hypocrites, one reason for James’ memorable and challenging line in James 3:1.

The AH, at the end of v. 7, again, drills down on his main point with regard to these former mentors, *“and imitate their faith.”* By imitating their faith, we are inspired to live as they lived, and this will bring us to the same outcome of their way of life. Their spiritual character over the course of a life lived for Christ reveals what God can do with such unpromising material as He has in me, you and all of us! He uses us, even as flawed and imperfect Christians. Just as their faith sustained them to the end, and their resolve to trust the Lord and to serve Him alone, relying on His matchless grace to persevere until the end, left a legacy for those whose lives they had touched with the Gospel, so too, will our lives do the same for those we are to lead and teach. God back for a moment to II Tim. 3:12 where Paul warns Timothy of persecution for *“all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus.”* Don’t give up – remember, consider and live your life as those who loved you taught you to do.

Jesus the Same. What Does This Mean?

vv. 8-9

“This verse is not a description of the immutable eternal nature of the Son.”² Although this statement is true, it is not really all of what this verse is about. What it really points to is Jesus’ deep sympathy, mercy, purposeful direction, steadfast grace and mercy, holiness, sinlessness, perfect suffering on our behalf, and His sovereign Lordship over all. Think about it – we know there have been changes in how Jesus has been presented to us in the Bible. He is the eternal Son of the Father, co-Creator, at times appearing in the OT as “the Angel of the Lord,” prophesied to be a Servant, then,

¹ See the lyrics on the last page of his lesson

² Alistair Begg & Sinclair Ferguson, “Name Above All Names”, Crossway, 2013, p. 149

although God, born as a human baby on earth, living as one of us, then dying (something God cannot do in His Spirit), being raised up back to life, ascending and taking His place at God's right hand, and living out the role of our great High Priest. He is the root of David, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, and possesses so many other titles. So, what is being described in v. 8 is not a Christ who has not changed at all – in many senses, change has been very obvious – so this is about something else, something that is meant to comfort us and realize that because He cannot change, in fact, has never changed and never will, we can trust all His promises.

He is spoken of in the Scriptures as "Prophet, Priest and King." Edmund Clowney accentuates this for us;

"Jesus Christ brings eternal salvation because He is unchanging as our Prophet, Priest and King. As our prophet, He is God's last word, for God has spoken finally in His Son. As our Priest, he is the Mediator of the New Covenant that stands forever. As our King, He rules over a kingdom that cannot be shaken and that will never pass away."³

It is Christ's changelessness that encourages us to love and to seek Him. We know what to expect when we trust Him to guide our lives and keep us safe and on the narrow path. Matthew Barrett helpfully points this out;

"What would happen if God were subject to change, like a shadow? Variation in God would spell the death of his own perfection. No longer would he be someone than whom none greater could be conceived.

If he were to change for the better, that would imply that he was less than perfect beforehand. There was some type of deficiency and imperfection to his being. If he were to change for the worse, that would imply that he was perfect but no longer is perfect. An imperfection has been added to him or a perfection in him has been lost. So, he must change either from better to worse or from worse to better. In either option God cease to be eternally good. A God who is not eternally good cannot be God in the end. Immutability, we are impelled to conclude, is essential and necessary to God's identity as the perfect, supreme being."⁴

Matthew Barrett is right when he says this. Yet, there is an aspect of God's immutability that we have to realize must change by His own design, or we would never be saved. If God maintains His position of wrath against sinners, and is never able to respond in grace to save them, He would be immutable, but staunchly so, to the effect that no one would ever be reconciled to Him. A.H. Strong comments on this; ""God's immutability requires him to treat the wicked differently from the righteous. When the wicked repent, His treatment of them must change. Therefore, according to Strong, God's immutability "is not that of stone, that has no internal experience, but rather that of a column of mercury, that rises and falls with every change in the temperature of the surrounding atmosphere.""⁵

³ Edmund Clowney, as cited in J.M. Boice (ed), *Our Savior God*, Baker Books, 1980, p. 72

⁴ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater*, Baker Books, 2019, pp. 94-95

⁵ A.H. Strong, cited in Sam Storms, *The Grandeur of God*, Baker Books, 1984, pg. 115

I find this a great analogy. Not stone but mercury. This is an aspect of God's character that requires that His demeanor towards sinners changes. It is the occasion of our God-given faith and repentance, as per the quote above and of those that follow below. There are obviously, a lot of biblical examples of this, and in fact, our very salvation depends on this. One of the most famous examples is found in the book of Jonah. Since most are familiar with Jonah in principle, let's read a few highlights before I present the next quote about it. Note Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-10; 4:1-3,11.

Sam Storms next cites William G.T. Shedd – from Shedd's "Dogmatic Theology"; “If God had treated the Ninevites after their repentance, as he had threatened to treat them before their repentance, this would have proved him to be mutable. It would have showed him to be at one time displeased with impenitence, and at another, with penitence. Charnock (Immutability of God) remarks that “the unchangeableness of God, when considered in relation to the exercise of his attributes in the governing of the world, consists not in always acting in the same manner, however cases and circumstances may alter; but in always doing what is right, and in adapting his treatment of his intelligent creatures to the variations of their actions and characters. When the devils, now fallen, stood as glorious angels, they were the objects of God's love, necessarily; when they fell, they were objects God's hatred, because impure. The same reason that made him love them while they were pure, made him hate them when they were criminal. It is one thing for God to will a change in created things external to himself, and another thing for him to change in his own nature and character.”⁶

So, the fact that God never changes (cf. James 1:17), or that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever,” (like many dogmatic statements about God's attributes) must be carefully considered, so that we don't 'lock God into a prison of His own design,' so to speak because this particular change is not a deviation from His character, but is actually a manifestation of the perfection of His character. It is a direct aspect of His intention to save from His wrath all He has decided to save all along, and cannot possibly mean He cannot be depended upon! Note Isaiah 55:8-11. Storms wraps up his comments on this important topic by summarizing; “What all this means, very simply, is that God is dependable! Our trust in Him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that He will not, indeed cannot – change. His purposes are unfailing, His promises unassailable. It is because the God who promised us eternal life is immutable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love of Christ. It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35- 39).”⁷

⁶ IBID, Storms, Grandeur, citing W.G.T. Shedd, pgs 114-115

⁷ IBID, pg. 116

God's immutability, in a sense, is preconditioned to respond by declaring an ungodly sinner (cf. Rom. 5:6) "righteous" based on His provision of the sacrificial substitutional atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ (slain B4TFOTW – cf. I Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8) upon the response of God-given faith and repentance.

In the context of what precedes v. 8 (v. 7), we find very practical theological advice – what was good in the past, is still good now, and will continue to be good in the future. Even when our culture changes, and disregards what we know to have been true, and replaces it with socialistic nonsense, we can be settled in knowing that Christ is a stable Rock (cf. Isa. 44:8) – One we can fully place our trust in because He does not change or alter His course because the world changes course! What is true of humanity, life, love, mercy, grace & what is right, remains right, and is always found in who Christ is. Notice how HB Charles illustrates this:

"An author once reflected on his youth, when he lived in a boarding house. A retired music teacher also lived there. Over time, the young author and the old musician struck up a friendship. Every morning, they played out the same routine. The young man would burst through the old man's door and ask, "Hey old man! What's the news today?" The old man would take out his tuning fork and strike it against his wheel chair. Then he would joyfully announce, "Young man, the good news today is that the note you just heard is Middle C. It was Middle C yesterday. It is Middle C today. And a thousand years from now, it will still be Middle C. The tenor upstairs sings off note. And the piano across the hall is flat. But this is Middle C." So it is with the Lord Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever. The exalted Christ is always our hope, strength and joy."⁸

And Richard Phillips, citing AW Tozer, adds his flavour to this as well;

"The Christian life is ever the same, unchanged in all generations. The stories and teaching in the Bible are not irrelevant to modern and postmodern man. In the face of the world's complaint that ours is an outmoded creed, this is our reply, "Jesus Christ is the same." This is why we should study church history and Christian biographies, because other lives of faith are examples for us. A.W. Tozer wrote, "One of the most popular current errors, and the one out of which springs most of the noisy, blustering religious activity in evangelical circles, is the notion that as times change, the church must change with them." In contrast, our wisdom is that of Jeremiah 6:16, which says, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls (NIV)."⁹

Not only must we remember our former mentors and imitate them, we must use as our base, our foundation, the fact of v. 8. Since Jesus is the same, it's now our turn to do what others did for us, and feed them (& live out before them) the truths of God's Word which supersedes the world's changing wisdom. Whether we are formally church leaders, or just mature believers who can be living examples of Christlikeness, we have a mission to come alongside those who have been providentially brought into our lives, so we have an obligation to lovingly teach others about Christ.

⁸ HB Charles,, in High King of Heaven, John MacArthur (ed), Moody, 2018, p. 162

⁹ AW Tozer, cited by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 595

The same grace that enabled the former leaders to trust and obey God and to live faithfully in order to please Christ is still and will always be available to those who will avail themselves of God's timeless wisdom and grace.

Then v. 9 builds on this by exhorting us to *“not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.”* In the flow of v. 9, it is apparent, because the AH mentions *“not by foods,”* that he is referring to the OT, Judaistic old covenant law, which placed great emphasis on foods, limiting Jewish followers by what and when to eat certain foods. However, this clue to what the strange and diverse teachings might be that would lead them away from the solid truth of Christ, does not limit the exhortation not to be tempted to leave the faith and follow odd religious concepts. Based on what the AH said in Heb. 5:1-14, we know these recipients were susceptible to false doctrine, not being solidly grounded or mature in the faith, even despite their relatively lengthy time in the church.

This is always a concern for believers. Notice Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30, and his exhortation to Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:1-4, and also II Cor. 11:13-14. Believers, especially unwary, biblically illiterate or weak ones, are susceptible to being drawn aside by half-truths or things that sound good from outside the church, or sadly, sometimes, from within it!

How do we, as believers, as church members, tell the difference between sound doctrine and false doctrine? Do we count on the sincerity or popularity of the pastor or teacher or do we trust them because we like them? Or worse – because the message is popular and everyone in evangelicalism is convinced it is solid? That is how a lot of people shop for truth, but we need to be discerning consumers of what is being put forward as “truth.” We must be wary of anything that appears to be a syncretistic blending of God's Word and some new wrinkle, or a promise of grace mixed with legalistic demands, or ‘new’ truth that no one in the church ever ‘saw’ before.

The last part of v. 9 – *“for it is good...not by foods...have not benefited those devoted to them.”* does not necessarily concern any precise threat to one's faith, but Judaism did emphasize eating certain foods, and not eating certain foods. The way this verse is worded seems to lean towards eating sacramental foods that ‘provided’ some spiritual benefit – perhaps a Passover meal.

It is brought up a number of times in the NT that Jewish traditions over foods was a tough hurdle to overcome. Acts 10:9-16 is a prominent passage showing Peter that the foods which had been restricted in the OT (and during the gospels by the way), now that Christ had come and inaugurated the New Covenant, were no longer restricted. It took God three times in this vision to convince Peter of this drastic change. The purpose in this passage in Acts is that Peter was about to be summoned to a Gentile's house, to present him with the Gospel so that he (Cornelius) would respond and be saved. Note Acts 10:17-45 & 11:17-18.

This change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant discussed above, is also a change in direction from OT worship, and Sam Storms again comments about this regarding a change by God;

““The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to His creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God’s being or purpose. They are, rather, the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic Covenant was no change in God’s will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of His will, and eternal will which decreed change (i.e., a change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant). Christ’s coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the OT scheme. They were but the realization, historical and concrete, of what God from eternity decreed.”¹⁰

Besides this, Paul seems to have battled against this issue all the time – cf. I Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16 & Rom. 14:17. The point the author of Hebrews appears to be making is that foods, or outward (even pious) activities in and of themselves do not provide anyone with spiritual blessings – only the exercise of faith in Christ does that. The AH did deal briefly with this in Heb. 9:9-10.

Outside the Camp

vv. 10-11

Since verse 10 is now a comment on a probable attack or some serious persecution that formerly Jewish people, now converted to Christ were being divided by, because they did not observe Jewish feasts any longer. In fact, it seemed to Jews that Christians observed no physical altar or outward sacrificial ceremonies. This verse responds to that criticism. In fact, the Christian altar is the Cross where Jesus sacrificed Himself for believers. The author’s use of ‘altar’ refers to the system of worship Christians now had, and unconverted people like Jews, had no right to attend (i.e., “*those who serve the tent*” = Jewish priests).

Then, v. 11 further explains what the author meant by v. 10. He is referring without a doubt to the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. Whereas in many OT sacrifices, the priests were given some of the meat offered, but not eaten by anyone and not consumed by fire, as a part of how they made their living (note Lev. 19:5-6; 22:29-30; cf. I Sam. 2:12-17); the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were strictly to be offered, not eaten by anyone – note Lev. 16:27-28 (and cf. Lev. 23:26-32). So the author is actually pointing to this (possibly) as a type of Christ’s sacrifice. He suffered outside the gate (of Jerusalem). The Day of Atonement duties were performed by only the ranking High Priest – no regular priest could administer it by Mosaic law.

Although the practice of burning bulls outside the camp for sin offerings was common (Ex. 29:14; Lev. 4:12,21; 9:11), the mention of the High Priest and outside the camp has direct connotations to Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

¹⁰ IBID, Grandeur, pgs. 111-112

The City to Come

vv. 12-14

“The above two verses roundly condemn the entire mechanical sacramental system of religion.”¹¹ We can easily apply this condemnation to the RC practice of trans-substantiation which promotes the idea that the Lord’s Table (the Eucharist) elements of bread and wine literally become Christ’s body and blood and provide grace to the one who partakes.

But the AH is making a comparison here between Christ’s death and the fate of these sacrificial animals. *“So, Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood.”* The gate in this case is the walls of Jerusalem – cf. JN 19:17-20.

The importance of the contrast is significant, because in Heb. 10:4, the AH told us that *“the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins.”* And in 10:10, he says, *“we’ve been sanctified through the offering of Jesus Christ once for all,”* and in 10:29, *“we are sanctified by the blood of the covenant.”* He is being very clear that the only sacrifice that cleanses anyone from sin is that of Jesus Christ! In Heb. 9:22, we are also told that *“without shedding of blood there is no cleansing of sins”* and this is very specifically – in I JN 1:7 – Christ’s blood alone!

OK – so Christ suffered outside the camp. If He had to die, it had to be somewhere didn’t it? Now the AH makes his main point – v. 13 – *“Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”* Richard Phillips explains this and applies it very well;

“Outside the gate he suffered and died. In that separation, a principle is established for all who would come to God through him. Outside the camp is where we go to find the grace of God, for that is where the cross was raised, where God meets with us to forgive our sin and to accept us in the righteousness of the Son whom the world despised.

This means that if you want acceptance in the courts of respectable academia, if you want to be admired in the cocktail lounges of conventional and progressive worldly wisdom, and especially if you want to avoid the scandal of a religion that man rejects, then you may not have fellowship with that Jesus Christ. You may not approach his cross by staying within the safe confines of the worldly city, for the cross is found outside the camp. But if you go outside the gates of worldly acceptance, not because you have some grudge against the world but because you see Jesus there, you will gain the salvation he bought with his blood to make you holy unto God.”¹²

This fact is an oft-suppressed truth about true Christianity – the blessings of salvation cannot be had without the disgrace of Jesus’ cross. Consider the scandal of it: I Cor. 1:22-24; and the hatred and persecution that will dog all true believers – 2 Tim. 3:12; Acts 14:22; JN 15:18-19; and so on. If we desire to be united with Christ, and to rejoice in the blessing of His salvation, we must face the disgrace with which He was led outside the camp to be crucified.

¹¹ Richard Phillips, p. 603

¹² Phillips, p. 605

In this case, the camp is more than Jerusalem, where historically, Jesus died outside of its walls. No, in this case, it now refers to “the established norms and ordinances of Judaism to the readers of the letter. What was formerly sacred was now unhallowed, because Jesus had been expelled from it; what was formerly unhallowed was now sacred, because Jesus was there.”¹³

Today, wherever Jesus is denied as sole Saviour and Lord, whether that is in false churches, anti-Christian religions, cults, among friends or co-workers, amongst family members, all of us who want to follow Him must be willing to leave those ‘camps’ and go to where Christ is.

Verse 14 – The point of v. 14 further enhances what the AH has already said. We are called to forsake the world and follow Christ, and we must remember that our inheritance and our citizenship is found, not in this world (where we are sojourners, just passing through), but in the place we are bound for. Note Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10. We have also been told by the author (6:19; 10:20) that we have been brought into a heavenly situation, with Christ in His heavenly dwelling (Heb. 12:22-24), as God’s children, as co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14-17). Richard Phillips again comments:

“We need to remember the heavenly situation that corresponds with our being outside the camp with Jesus. The writer of Hebrews has referred to this, our heavenly situation, as being within the veil (6:19; 10:20). We are brought near to God, with Christ in his heavenly dwelling, as God’s children, his people, his flock. Therefore by faith we see that outside the camp is truly within the veil with Christ. This is what Paul meant when he said, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Yet the day will come when what is hidden will be revealed to the eyes of all. The day will come when the gates of this earthly city will be closed for judgment and destruction, and we will be glad to be outside those gates. Then what has seemed such a weak, ignoble place where we now are found in the shadow of a cursed cross, will be manifested in the glory of a new heavens and new earth as the cornerstone of a city that will never pass away, bathed in the light of the open tomb of Christ’s resurrection morn. “behold”, he says, “I am coming soon!” Then speaking of the enduring city, that which is to come, he cries, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates” (Rev. 22:12-14).”¹⁴

At this point it is tough not to think of Rev. 21:1-7,22-27 & Rev. 22:1-5. And to finish off, notice Paul’s words from I Cor. 2:7-9.

Here are the lyrics I mentioned early in this lesson (on page 2), written by Jon Mohr, as sung by Steve Green;

¹³ FF Bruce, Hebrews, pp. 381-382

¹⁴ Phillips, p. 607

Find Us Faithful

We're pilgrims on the journey
Of the narrow road
And those who've gone before us line the way.
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary.
Their lives a stirring testament
To God's sustaining grace.

O may all who come behind us find us faithful,
May the fire of our devotion
Light their way.
May the footprints that we leave,
Lead them to believe,
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
O may all who come behind us find us faithful.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
Let us run the race not only for the prize,
But as those who've gone before us,
Let us leave to those behind us
A heritage of faithfulness
Passed on through godly lives.
After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone,
And our children sift through all
We've left behind,
May the clues that they discover
And the memories they uncover
Become the light that leads them to
The road we each must find.

O may all who come behind us find us faithful,
May the fire of our devotion
Light their way.
May the footprints that we leave,
Lead them to believe,
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
O may all who come behind us find us faithful.