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The Epistle to the Hebrews as pastoral encouragement

It was a small group of believers, only 20 or 30, but they shared a common experience of hardship.¹ They had left behind the assurance and secure identity that only an ancient and close-knit community can provide in the form of a first-century synagogue.² Judaism was a widespread and recognized religion in the Greco-Roman world. Most first-century Jews would have thought it madness to risk the comparative safety of their worldwide community for the uncertainties of the fledgling Jesus movement.

Worse, they felt the cruel taunts by those who did not share their belief in Jesus. Former companions heaped verbal abuse on this little group of Jewish believers who had “compromised” their heritage by following Jesus, the crucified Jew. “Where is Jesus now?” they mocked. “Where’s your temple and altar?” “Do you have a covenant with God?” “Where’s your history and tradition?”

The pastor of this little gathering of Jewish believers was absent, but he hoped to be “restored to [them] very soon” (Heb. 13:19).³ In the meantime, he wrote a word of encouragement, along with a series of dire warnings. That letter is what we know today as the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Their struggles

These Jewish believers had “endured a hard struggle with

sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution” (Heb. 10:32, 33). Some had been thrown in prison. Many had their property plundered (v. 34), probably while in prison.

Their pastor’s emphasis on community and shared pain is unpromising: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb. 13:3). They had looked death in the face as they struggled against the hostility of their former community (Heb. 12:3, 4).

Some were about to abandon their confidence and to shrink back (Heb. 10:35, 38, 39). In fact, some were drifting away from the message they had heard (Heb. 2:1), and others had fallen into the habit of “neglecting to meet together” (Heb. 10:25). Their hands were drooping and their knees were buckling; they were shrinking back instead of pushing forward (Heb. 12:12). They were in danger of falling away (Heb. 6:6), of spurning the Son of God (Heb. 10:29), of growing weary and fainthearted (Heb. 12:3), of refusing the voice of God (v. 25), and of being led astray by their former faith (Heb. 13:9). Indeed, the pastor feared that “they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:6).

This was clearly a community in need of exhortation and encouragement.

The pastor’s initial response

The first matter the pastor’s exhortation to the Hebrews clarified was the antiquity and superiority of the Jesus faith. Jesus was the eternal Son through whom God had now spoken (Heb. 1:2, 3). And, as a Son (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14), He was superior to all the messengers (angels) through whom God had spoken to “our ancestors” in the past (Heb. 1:1, 5), including Moses (Heb. 3:1–6). Jesus’ superiority over the messengers was made clear by contrasting the Son with the messengers (vv. 6–13). The author affirmed this with a string of Old Testament (OT) passages that he applied to Jesus (Deut. 32:43 [Greek OT]; Pss. 45:6, 7; 102:26–28; 110:1). Notice that “Lord” in Hebrews 1:10 refers to Jesus.⁴ He is the Creative Agent of God (vv. 2, 3), who “founded the earth” and created the heavens (v. 10). And though they will all wear out like clothing (v. 11), the Son remains forever (vv. 8, 11, 12b).

“We,” their pastor reminded them, “do have a high priest, a sacrifice, a sanctuary, a covenant, a promised land, and a chosen city.” “We have a great high priest . . . Jesus, the Son of God” (Heb. 4:14), who is “a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:20). “He holds his priesthood permanently, because He continues forever” (Heb. 7:24), whereas death prevented the Levitical

priests from continuing in office (v. 23). High priests, by definition, offered sacrifices, so “it is necessary for this priest [Jesus] also to have something to offer” (Heb. 8:3); and “this he did once for all when he offered himself” (Heb. 7:27), and “the sacrifice of himself” was for the removal of sin (Heb. 9:26).

The blood of bulls and goats dealt only with the external pollution but were entirely inadequate as a means of cleansing from the inner reality of sin (Heb. 9:9, 10; 10:4, 11). The death

9:24), the new covenant as their divine guarantee, a heavenly country as their better land (Heb. 11:15, 16), and the heavenly Jerusalem as their city—“the city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22; 11:10, 16). Or, to use his favorite adjective, Christians⁵ have a better leader (Heb. 1:4), a better hope (Heb. 6:9; 7:19), a better covenant promise (Heb. 7:22; 8:6), a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:23), better possessions (Heb. 10:34), a better country (Heb. 11:16), a better resurrection (v. 35), and a better future (v. 40).⁶

whose suffering consecrates (that is, the Son) and those who are consecrated (that is, the believers) are united to the one Father, and “for this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11).⁷ To confirm the family relationship between Jesus and the believers, the pastor placed three OT texts on the lips of Jesus: Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17b, and Isaiah 8:18a. The first reference has Jesus testifying to His siblings in the context of the worshipping community (Heb.

“We do have a high priest,” *the writer of Hebrews explains,* **“a sacrifice, a sanctuary, a covenant, a promised land, and a chosen city.”**

(blood) of Jesus is the potent force that truly sanctifies (Heb. 10:10; 13:12), perfects (Heb. 10:14), forgives (v. 18), and cleanses sin at the deepest level of the human heart (v. 22). “For this reason”—that is, the effectiveness of Christ’s death to purge sin—Jesus “is the mediator of a new covenant [or promise]” (Heb. 9:15; 12:24), indeed, “of a better covenant” (Heb. 8:6). This new covenant achieved what the old one merely prefigured; that is, “the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15), “forgiveness” (Heb. 10:17, 18), access into “the presence of God” (Heb. 9:24), and “the full assurance of hope” (Heb. 6:11), a hope that is “sure and steadfast” (v. 19). The open access into the very presence of God that Jesus’ death has achieved was an encouragement to the weary Jewish believers to press forward with confidence and full assurance (Heb. 3:6, 14; 4:16; 10:19–22, 35; 11:1; 13:6).

Thus, the pastor assured his little flock that they have Jesus as their high priest, His death as their sacrifice, heaven itself as their sanctuary (Heb.

The call to persevere

The pastor called on two examples of those who endured suffering and yet pressed on: Jesus and the past heroes of endurance. Psalm 8, the pastor noted, promised that humans were to be crowned with glory and honor and that all things were to be subjected to them. However, we do not see that yet. No indeed, said the pastor, “but we do see Jesus,” who is “now crowned with glory and honor because of the *suffering of death*” (Heb. 2:5–9; emphasis added). Through suffering He was fitted to be a sympathetic high priest (vv. 17, 18). Even though He was a Son, nevertheless, He knew what it meant to stay on course despite the pain (suffering) (Heb. 4:15; 5:8).

The community’s experience of suffering for their faith united them with the suffering of Christ, “the pioneer of their salvation,” who was fully prepared for His role “through sufferings” (Heb. 2:10). Jesus tasted death for everyone (v. 9), and through His death He set apart the little community, and us too, to God (Heb. 10:10, 14). Hence, the One

2:12). The second citation has Jesus confessing His confidence in God even in the context of His suffering, which is a clear encouragement to His addressees (v. 13a). In the last quotation, Jesus speaks of the believers as the children whom God had given Him (v. 13b).

Jesus’ identity with the suffering Jewish believers was no charade; it was real. He, too, shared in the same flesh and blood (v. 14). Indeed, He became, in every respect, like His brothers and sisters. Two purpose clauses clarify how His becoming a human helped the “descendants of Abraham” (v. 16): “so *that* through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (v. 14), and “so *that* he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” (v. 17). The author’s pastoral intent in this chapter is clear: “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (v. 18); a sentiment that is repeated in 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize

with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”⁸

To a weary and faltering congregation (Heb. 6:11, 12), it was reassuring to learn that the promise of God’s rest was still open and lay ahead of His pilgrim people.⁹ God’s rest has its origin in the creation narrative (Heb. 4:4, quoting Gen. 2.2, 3), and it was still available to the Exodus generation. But that generation failed to enter it because of a lack of a persevering faith (Heb. 3:16–19; 4:2, 6); and Joshua’s leading the wilderness survivors into the Promised Land was not the ultimate fulfillment of entering God’s rest (v. 8). If it had been, David, many years later, could not have spoken of “today” (Ps. 95:7b): “again he sets a certain day—‘today’—saying through David much later [than the Exodus], in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’ ” (Heb. 4:7). The pastor urged his congregation not to emulate the unbelief of the wilderness generation, but rather to make every effort to enter God’s future rest (v. 11).¹⁰

The future

The conjoining of suffering and a future hope in chapter 11 also reflects the writer’s conviction that abuse is a real possibility for those who heed his call to affirm Christ publicly and boldly (Heb. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35). Equally, the writer invited his readers to look by faith beyond the present exigencies to a future made secure by the achievements of Jesus. Faith is the capacity to see and be certain about God’s invisible future (Heb. 11:1, 3).¹¹ Such as Noah who, when warned about things not yet seen, prepared an ark (v. 7). Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, yet looking forward to the city of God (vv. 8, 9).

The patriarchs saw the promises of God from a distance, and longed for the future city of God (vv. 13–16). Isaac blessed his sons with his eye on the future (v. 20). Joseph saw the return to Canaan and gave instructions about his

burial there (v. 22). Moses suffered hardship with the people of God, eschewing the comforts of Egypt, preferring the reproach of Christ because he saw Him who is unseeable (vv. 25–27).¹² In Hebrews 11, the “emphasis is on faithful deeds” and a persevering faith, that is, on a faith that turns “hope into reality and the unseen into sight.”¹³ The eyes of faith could see that future rest not far ahead. The pastor’s flock was among “those who are about to inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14, author’s translation), for the world that is about to come is theirs (Heb. 2:5). Meanwhile, they were to seize the hope that lies ahead (Heb. 6:18) and press towards it, enduring the trials as divine discipline (Heb. 12:7–11).

The catalogue in 11:32–40 begins positively by listing the triumphs of some of the OT judges, and ending with David and the prophets, but then suddenly the tone shifts to a dire list of calamities in verses 35b–38. The list is fearsome: tortured, jeered, flogged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The exemplars of faith from of old, who have run their race, surround, so to speak, these tiring Jewish believers and urge them to keep on running with perseverance (Heb. 12:1, 2).¹⁴


In their struggle against those who opposed them, this band of early Christian Jews had not yet suffered to the point of shedding their blood (v. 4), but Jesus had suffered so (Heb. 2:9, 10, 18; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12). Their Champion (*archēgos*), Jesus, had finished His course, having endured “hostility against himself from sinners,” and even “endured the cross, despising its shame” (vv. 3, 2). The pastor wisely, therefore, admonished his flock to fix their eyes on (*aphoraō*) Jesus and to contemplate (*analogizomai*) Him who endured such pain (vv. 2, 3) and to go by faith where He has already gone (Heb. 6:19, 20; 10:19–22).

Conclusion

When the author, in his concluding remarks, quoted two encouraging texts

from the OT (Deut. 31:6; Ps. 118:6), he was not simply offering the mandatory “have a nice day” that one receives at the supermarket’s checkout. His texts were appropriate to the actual situation of the readers:

I will never leave you or forsake you.
So we can say with confidence,
The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?

The call, then, was to go outside the camp of Israel “and bear the abuse He endured,” knowing that believers had no enduring city here, but were to look to the future for the secure city of God (Heb. 13:13, 14).¹⁵ 

- 1 William L. Lane suggests a household gathering of some 15 or 20 persons. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), iii.
- 2 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 3–9; P. T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010), 9–13. Possibly they had not entirely cut their ties with their former Judaism.
- 3 All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989), unless indicated otherwise.
- 4 Bruce, *Hebrews*, 63.
- 5 “Christian” is an anachronism, but it is used for convenience.
- 6 Hebrews uses the comparative adjective “better” “superior” (*kreittōn*) 12 times, which is 71 percent of the New Testament’s total usage.
- 7 Literally “brothers” (*adelphoi*), but the inclusive rendering of the NRSV is true to the overall meaning of the text.
- 8 We should not read too much into this verse regarding the theological debate over Jesus as a model of how to attain a sinless state in this life. This is a practical pastoral encouragement to a despondent group to persevere even when the Christian journey becomes exceedingly tough.
- 9 William G. Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 239–251.
- 10 The reference to the Sabbath (Heb. 4:9) is illustrative of God’s future rest. It does not prove the binding nature of the fourth commandment. However, since the addressees were very likely Sabbath-observant Christian Jews, it is a very meaningful illustration.
- 11 Only Romans (40 times) uses the noun “faith” (*πίστις*) more often than Hebrews (32 times). The meaning in Hebrews is not identical to the nuance Paul gives it in Romans.
- 12 Note the powerful paradox.
- 13 Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957), 471; William G. Johnsson, *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier: Hebrews* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1994), 205.
- 14 Norman H. Young, “Suffering: A Key to the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Australian Biblical Review* 51 (2003): 47–59.
- 15 Norman H. Young, “‘Bearing His Reproach’ (Hebrews 13:9–14),” *New Testament Studies* 48, no. 2 (2002): 243–61.

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