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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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Overview of Hebrews

Hebrews 1-13

On the morning of September 17, 490 BC, some 10,000 Greeks stood assembled on a narrow plain 26 miles east of Athens, ready to fight to the death, even to the last man. Behind them lay everything they held of value—their homes, their families, their lifestyle, their beautiful city of Athens. In front of them lay a seemingly invincible army of 48,000 men from the assembled forces of Darius I, the King of the Persian Empire. This vast invading force had landed from their awesome armada looking to plunder the Greeks and wipe them from the face of the earth. The narrow plain, hemmed in on both sides by boggy marshlands, was the chosen place of battle by the Persians, and it would become one of the most famous battlefields of the ancient world.

Somehow, against all odds, the Greeks defeated the Persians that day, winning the Battle of Marathon and saving Greek civilization. After the battle, the danger was not completely over. The Persian fleet was still able to threaten their beloved city of Athens itself. So the Greek army, in an amazing feat of strength and endurance, marched at doubletime from the battlefield and somehow reached Athens just before the Persian fleet did. And with time of the essence, the Athenians dispatched their best runner—Pheidippides—to inform the Athenian people of the victory and of the need to prepare for the Persians' coming. Pheidippides ran the famous distance from Marathon to Athens—26 miles—and gave the news to the leaders of Athens just before dying from the effort.

That run from Marathon to Athens has made the Battle of Marathon one of the most famous of the ancient world. It is memorialized in the distance race run all over the world now, a grueling 26 mile test of endurance.

I used to be a distance runner, but I never ran 26 miles. The furthest I ever ran in a race was 25 km, 15.6 miles. That was far enough!!

The Book of Hebrews presents the Christian life as a distance race:

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Book of Hebrews speaks with a serious tone about the need to PERSEVERE in the Christian life...

Hebrews 10:36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Such a great salvation!!! The Book of Hebrews stands alone in the Bible in revealing to us the greatness of Christ as the Mediator of a New and Better Covenant

A Superior Mediator... bringing a Superior Covenant... resulting in a Superior Life

The Book of Hebrews also stands before us giving us some of the more serious and severe warnings in the Bible

This Fall, we are going to look carefully at one of the most unique books in the Bible... and as we do, I think we will gain a clearer sense of both the greatness of Christ and of our salvation

I. General Overview

ESV Hebrews 13:22 I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

A. The Author's Own Statement of Intent: A "Word of Exhortation"

Basic concept: Christian salvation is a process, a journey that will only be completed when all the children of God are eternally perfect in glorious resurrection bodies

While we are in this world, we are in enemy territory, in grave danger

We must keep making progress on our journey, must continue fighting the good fight of faith, until we are done with this world

Thus, we must have "exhortation" along the way... this is what the author of Hebrews seeks to give us

1. Greek word: παρακλησις

A word of comfort, of consolation, of encouragement: spoken to someone in difficulty, in suffering, in distress... giving them internal courage and comfort to continue in the midst of their suffering

BUT ALSO a word of exhortation, warning and admonition: urging people to get moving, fight the good fight, keep running the race

One is the "softer side" of "paraklesis", the other the "harder side"

One side knows when to put an arm around you and cry with you when you're fighting overwhelming discouragement

The other side knows when to get tough with you like a coach, making you do thirty more wind sprints to get you fit for the fourth quarter

2. The Holy Spirit, our “Paraklete”

Word used here has the same root as the word Jesus used of the Holy Spirit

NIV John 14:26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

The NIV translates the word “paraklete” here as “Counselor”, similar to a lawyer... professional legal assistance

KJV uses “Comforter”, NASB and ESV uses “Helper”

Basic idea: the Holy Spirit lives with you, will be in you, and gives you moment by moment all the wise counsel, gentle comfort, stern rebukes, urgent warnings, and strong encouragements you will need to complete your long journey of salvation in this world

3. Used in Hebrews

NIV Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

NIV Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

So, the author says the letter to the Hebrews is a word of “paraklesis”... of comfort, or encouragement, or warning, or exhortation

It’s goal is to help Christians complete the pilgrimage of faith through enemy-held territory until they are safely in their eternal home

B. Audience

1. Overwhelming appeal to Old Testament scripture, sacrificial system, history, and imagery
2. Opening statement:

Hebrews 1:1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways

3. They had seen miracles, heard the gospel, had “been enlightened,” and had made some kind of profession of faith
 - a. heard the gospel
 - b. been enlightened

- c. seen miracles
- d. made some kind of profession of faith in Christ

Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

Hebrews 4:14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

C. Circumstances: Persecution and Threatened Apostasy

1. External persecution
2. Internal warfare: ongoing struggle with sin itself... Hebrews 3
3. Result: some Jewish professors of Christ were losing their courage and/or personal holiness and were renouncing their claims to be Christian: APOSTASY
 - a. drifting away from God
 - b. developing hardened hearts
 - c. losing their courage
 - d. staying away from church
 - e. going back to the old ways of Judaism

D. Author

1. Paul?
 - a. Clement of Alexandria openly believed Paul wrote Hebrews
 - b. Eusebius quotes Origen

“who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows.” [Hist. Eccl., VI, xxv, 11-14]
2. Other ancient possibilities

Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Timothy, Aquila, Silas, etc.

So, I will use the expression: “The author of Hebrews”

E. Significance

A.W. Pink: Central theme of Hebrews is the superiority of Christianity over Judaism

Hebrews 7:22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Hebrews 8:6 But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

Fine, but more precisely: the superiority of Christ over all other mediators including all the prophets, Moses Himself and the angels AND the superiority of the New Covenant Christ brought over the Old Covenant He fulfilled and superceded

A Superior Mediator... Bringing a Superior Covenant... Resulting in a Superior Life

1. Doctrine of Christ

- a. glorious descriptions of the person and work of Christ
- b. the exalted person of Christ, the Son of God: Hebrews 1:3
- c. the perfected work of Christ, the Mediator and High Priest from God

John Calvin: "There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His death, which so abundantly deals with the use of ceremonies as well as their [termination], and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law."

2. Old Covenant Obsolete

Hebrews 8:7-8, 13 7 For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. 8 But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.... By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

It is by this book especially that we know that we are not to offer animal sacrifices, that the Old Covenant religion which was so prominent has become fulfilled in Christ and is therefore obsolete. It is by this book that we do not establish Levitical priests to offer bulls and goats, that we do not erect a new temple to replace the old, that we do not make three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Without the teachings of this book, we might rightly wonder if God still expected these things of us.

3. New Covenant Complete

Hebrews 8:10-12 This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they

will be my people. 11 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12 For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

It is by the Book of Hebrews that we see the completeness and perfection of the New Covenant directly contrasted with the incompleteness and imperfection of the Old Covenant. Here we will learn what is included in the New Covenant, which the Old Covenant could never produce.

4. Old Covenant Explained

A.W. Pink: "Perhaps its chief distinctive value lies in its exposition of the O.T. types. It here we are taught that the Tabernacle and its furniture, the priesthood and their service, the various sacrifices and offerings all pointed to the person, offices, and glories of the Lord Jesus. Of Israel's priests it is said, "They serve at a copy and shadow of what is in heaven" (8:5); the first tabernacle was "a symbol for the present age" (9:9); the ceremonial law was "a shadow of good things to come" (10:1); Melchizedek was a type of Christ (7:15), Isaac was a figure of Him (11:19), and so on."

In the book of Hebrews, we can see how perfectly the Old Testament sacrificial system found its fulfillment in the cross of Jesus Christ... without Hebrews, we would not so clearly understand why God ordained such a river of animal blood in the Old Covenant, and why He no longer requires it today

5. Seven Perpetual Warnings to the Church

- a. don't drift away

Hebrews 2:1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

- b. don't turn away

Hebrews 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

- c. don't fall away

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, 6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

- d. don't shrink away

ESV Hebrews 10:39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

- e. don't stay away

Hebrews 10:25 *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

f. don't throw away

Hebrews 10:35 *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.*

g. don't be carried away

Hebrews 13:9 *Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.*

6. Six Perpetual Exhortations to the Church: Draw Near to God, Stand Firm in Faith

1) Let us draw near to God through Christ

ESV Hebrews 4:16 *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.*

Hebrews 10:22 *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

2) Let us hold fast to our faith and confidence

Hebrews 10:23 *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

3) Let us make progress in the race, pressing on toward perfection

Hebrews 6:1 *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity*

4) Let us consider each other, lest any should fall short of God's rest

Hebrews 4:1 *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

Hebrews 10:24 *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

5) Let us be willing to suffer for Christ, despising both this world's treasures and scorn

Hebrews 13:12-13 *Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.*

6) Let us worship God acceptably with thanksgiving and praise

Hebrews 12:28 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe*

II. Summary of the Major Sections

I. The Glorious Superiority of Jesus Christ (1:1-3:6)

A. The Glorious Superiority of Christ in His Deity (1:1-1:14)

Hebrews 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

1. Christ, the Final Word
2. Christ, the Son of God
3. Christ Superior to Angels
4. Christ Superior to All Creation

A return to Judaism is a rejection of Christ... as though Christ were superfluous, not essential

B. The First Warning: Don't Drift Away from Christ (2:1-4)

Hebrews 2:1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

C. The Glorious Superiority of Christ in His Humanity (2:5-18)

Hebrews 2:14-15 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

D. Christ Superior to Moses (3:1-6)

Hebrews 3:5-6 Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. ⁶ But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house.

II. Warnings Against Falling Away from God (3:7-6:20)

A. The Second Warning: Don't Turn Away from God (3:7-4:13)

Hebrews 3:7-8 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion..."

1. The Holy Spirit speaks a stern warning through Scripture, based on Israel's experience of rebellion
2. Scriptural instruction #1: Warnings through Israel's failure of faith

- a. looking back to David and Psalm 95 (c. 1000 B.C.)
 - b. looking further back to the Exodus (c. 1500 B.C.)
 - c. lesson learned: God made a promise to Israel; they refused to believe and enter
 - d. lesson applied: God has made a better promise to us, and what will our judgment be if we refuse to believe and enter?
3. Exhortation #1: If Today you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts and turn away from God
 4. Exhortation #2: See to it that no one in the church hardens their hearts and turns away from God
 6. Exhortation #3: Make the most of "Today" by entering God's Sabbath rest
 7. The Power of the Word of God to Uncover and Convict (4:12-13)

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

B. Christ the Great High Priest, Part 1 (4:14-5:10)

1. Christ, Our Great High Priest (4:14-16)
 - a. great in His position: in the heavens
 - b. great in His person: Son of God
 - c. great in His sympathy
 - d. great in His personal experience, tempted as we are
 - e. great in His personal holiness
2. Two more exhortations: Let us hold fast to our faith; Let us draw near to God
3. Christ's Priesthood Superior to Earthly Priesthood (5:1-10)
 - a. Christ's Priesthood Based on Sonship (5:5)
 - b. Christ's Priesthood Based on Perfect Obedience (5:7-9)
 - c. Christ's Priesthood in the Order of Melchizedek (5:6, 10)

C. The Third Warning: Press on to Maturity, and Don't Fall Away (5:11-6:20)

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

III. The Glorious Superiority of the New Covenant to the Old Covenant (7:1-10:39)

A. Christ the Great High Priest, Part 2: The Superior Order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)

1. The Mysterious Greatness of Melchizedek (7:1-10)

- a. mysterious priest-king, "like the Son of God" (7:1-3)
- b. Melchizedek greater than Abraham and Levi (7:4-9)
- c. implication: priestly order of Melchizedek greater than order of Levi

2. The Need for a New and Superior Priesthood (7:11-16)

- a. imperfection of the Levitical Priesthood (7:11)
- b. the need for a change in the law (7:12-14): no one from the tribe of Judah could ever be a priest
- c. the change confirmed by the coming of Christ (7:15-16)

3. The Superiority of the New Priesthood (7:16-28)

- a. superior because it is based on an indestructible life (7:16-17)
- b. superior because the old order was weak and useless (7:18-19)
- c. superior because of the divine oath (7:20-22)
- d. superior because of its permanence (7:23-25)
- e. superior because of the perfect character of Jesus (7:26-28)

B. The Superiority of the New Covenant Sacrifice to the Old: Reality vs. Shadow (8:1-10:18)

- 1. Christ: the true priest in the true heavenly tabernacle (8:1-2)
- 2. Old Covenant merely a shadow of heavenly reality (8:3-5)
- 3. New Covenant founded on better promises (8:6)

4. Old Covenant faulty because the people were faulty (8:7-9)
5. The better promises of the New Covenant (8:10-12)

Hebrews 8:10-12 This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

- a. promise #1: laws written in hearts and minds (8:10)
 - b. promise #2: perfect intimacy with God (8:10-11) “I will be their God and they will be my people”
 - c. promise #3: complete forgiveness of sins (8:12)
6. Old Covenant obsolete and will soon disappear (8:13)
 7. Old Covenant tabernacle merely a temporary shadow (9:1-10)
 8. Christ’s eternal redemption in His blood (9:11-14)
 9. Christ the mediator of the New Covenant (9:15-22)
 10. Christ’s blood the final sacrifice (9:23-28)
 11. Endlessly repeated animal sacrifices merely a shadow (10:1-4)
 12. Christ’s sacrificed body the reality (10:5-10)
 13. Christ the enthroned high priest and his perfected work (10:11-18)

C. Central Exhortations: Draw Near, Stand Firm, and Suffer by Faith (10:19-10:39)

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

1. Author’s approach: “Since we have this, let us do that...”
2. What we have
 - a. confidence to enter the Most Holy Place

- i) by the blood of Jesus
 - ii) by a new a living way: His body
 - b. a great High Priest over the house of God
- 3. What we must do: “Let us...”
 - a. let us draw near
 - i) with a sincere heart
 - ii) in full assurance of faith
 - iii) having our hearts sprinkled from a guilty conscience
 - iv) having our bodies washed with pure water: holy living
 - b. let us hold fast the confession of our hope
 - i) no wavering
 - ii) based on the faithfulness of God
 - c. let us consider each other
 - i) to stimulate each other to love and good deeds
 - ii) not forsaking assembling
 - iii) encouraging each other
 - iv) more and more as the Day approaches

D. Terrifying Warning Against Apostasy (10:27-31)

1. Apostasy in view, not merely sin
2. Sinless perfection no part of earthly journey
3. Verse 29 the key to understand what author has in mind

Hebrews 10:29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

4. Terrifying warnings: vs. 27, 30-31

Hebrews 10:30-31 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

E. Exhortation Based on Past Faithfulness (10:32-39)

1. Author's goal: perseverance and progress, not apostasy (vs. 36, 39)
2. Means to the end: encouragement based on past actions
3. The need of the hour: perseverance in the faith
 - a. regular theme in the letter... it's not those who start but those who finish
 - b. example: Hebrews 3:14 "We have become partakers IF we hold fast the beginning until the end..."
 - c. encouragement: "just a very little while"... the Second Coming of Christ
 - d. back to the basics: the righteous will live by faith
 - i) faith justifies
 - ii) faith perseveres
 - iii) faithlessness falters and shrinks back
 - iv) shrinking back results in destruction

IV. The Life of Faith (Hebrews 11:1-40)... so-called "Hall of Faith"

A. Keeping Hebrews 11 in Context:

1. Jews persecuted for their faith
2. Tempted to stop assembling with other Christians
3. Tempted to go back to Judaism
4. Strong exhortation to stand firm, persevere, make progress
5. Immediate context: Hebrews 10:36-39

faithless shrinking back results in destruction

6. Author's immediate goal: to inspire faith by understanding it in biblical examples

B. Overview of the Chapter

1. Definition of faith (vs. 1)

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

4. Faith unfolded in redemptive history

- a. faith before the flood (vs. 4-7)
- b. the faith of the patriarchs (vs. 8-22)
- c. the faith of Moses and the Exodus (vs. 23-31)
- d. the faith of various Old Testament heroes, named and unnamed (vs. 32-38)
- e. an astonishing vision of unity: no one gets the final reward until everyone gets it

V. God Working in Us a Life Pleasing to Him (Hebrews 12:1-13:25)

A. Running the Race with Endurance by Focusing on Christ (12:1-3)

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

B. God’s Fatherly Discipline (12:4-17)

C. Worshiping God Acceptably for the Unshakable Kingdom He’s Giving Us (12:18-29)

D. Various Exhortations (13:1-19)

E. Closing Benediction: “May God work in us what is pleasing to Him” (13:20-25)

Bottom Line:

Since we have a Better Mediator—Jesus Christ

Since He brought a Better Covenant—the New Covenant

Since the core of the New Covenant is 1) total forgiveness of sins; 2) God’s Law written in our hearts;
3) An intimate relationship with God

Let us RUN THIS NEW RACE WITH ENDURANCE to the very end!!!