

MOVING ON TO MATURITY

Final Words

Hebrews 13:18-25

Good morning. Can you believe it? After one full year, we have come to the end of our series on the book of Hebrews. And I hope that God has spoken to you through this study as he has to me. I want you to know what a privilege it is for me (as well as the others who regularly share in the Sunday morning teaching) to study, pray and prepare to open up God's Word each week. Thank you for giving us this privilege.

I'm sure, too, that you have gained new insight, or have been convicted of areas in which you need to "move on to maturity" in your own journey with Christ. At the end of this message, we're going to give you the opportunity to share based on the questions that you have in the sermon notes in this morning's bulletin. We'd love to hear from you.

Notice with me what the speaker says in the last few verses of this letter, starting in verse 22:

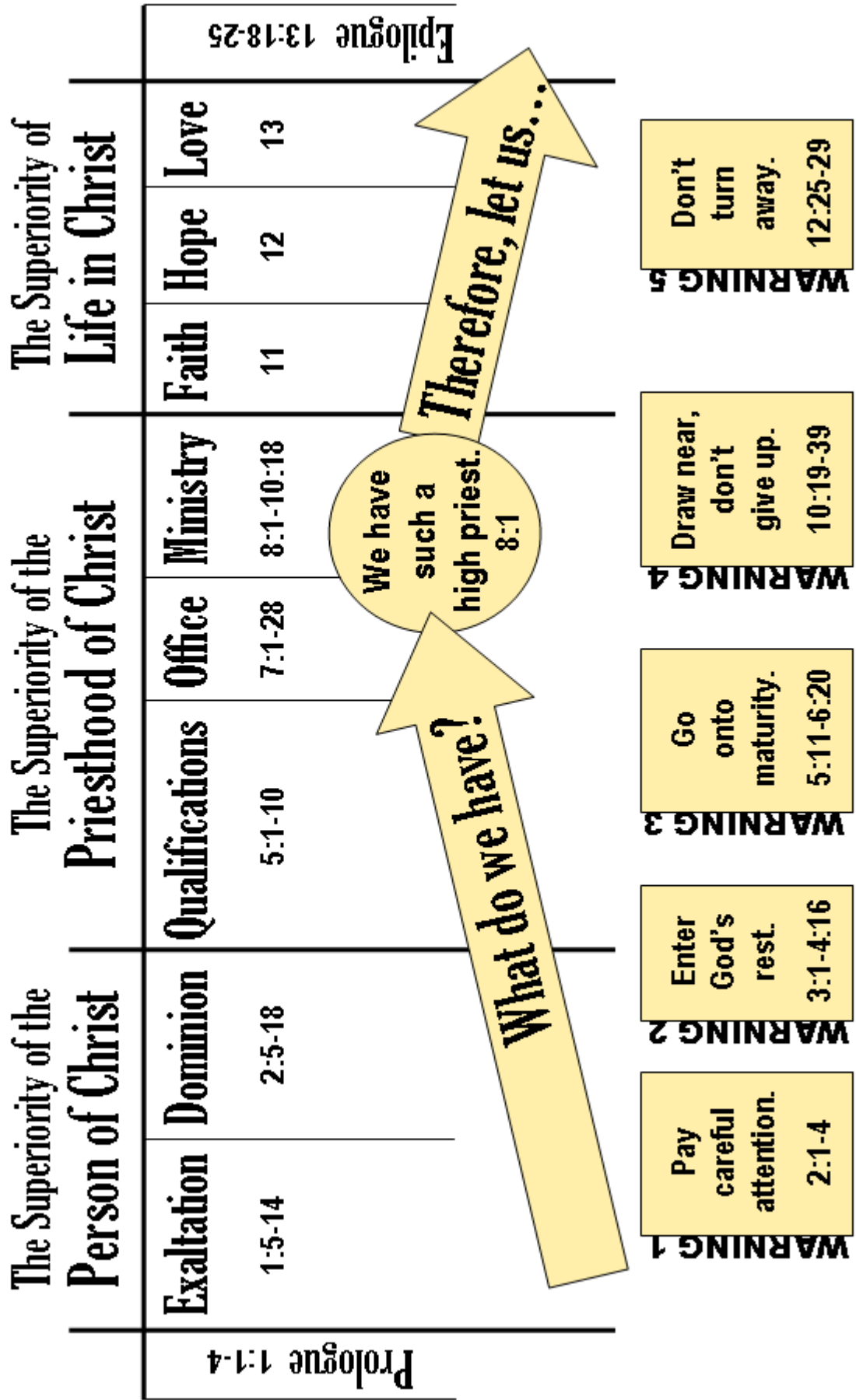
Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter. Hebrews 13:22

The final words of someone we know or love carry a lot of importance. Maybe you remember the last words of a friend or family member that was taken suddenly. If you're like me, you rehearse those over and over in your mind. Last words are important, too, for the one speaking them. That was certainly the case with Jesus when he sat down in the intimate setting of the upper room and gave his final words to his disciples before dying. But then, too, we have those final words of Jesus before ascending into heaven: "Go and make disciples of all the nations." Yes, final words carry much weight, for both the speaker and the hearer.

"Brothers..." he says. The speaker has a pastor's heart for those to whom he's writing. He warns, he exhorts, he encourages, and he pastorally identifies himself with his readers. He often includes himself in the very exhortations given to the readers. He constantly addresses them as "brothers and sisters."

He goes on to say, "I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter." That's the understatement of the year! Hebrews is the third longest epistle in the New Testament. What we need to remember, however, is that this "letter" was really a sermon. It was meant to be read – or preached – among these believing Hebrews. You can read this book aloud in 1 hour. And given the length of some sermons in the early church (à la Paul when he preached until early morning!), that's pretty short. When was the last time I preached that long? I don't get the impression that too many early Christians were overly preoccupied, looking at their watches and anxious to get home to take out that roast beef for the family meal.

Consider Jesus, our Great High Priest



Just what is the “word of exhortation?” Here’s how we’ve summarized it: “Consider Jesus, our Great High Priest.” In this first section, the emphasis is on the *person* of Christ (1:1 – 4:16). More specifically, we see his *exaltation* above the angels and above all things (1:5-14). And then the writer turns our attention to Christ’s *dominion* over the world to come (2:5-18).

This letter gives us two words of advice. First, as to the future, remember there is a better world to come. Second, as to the present, keep your eyes on Jesus. What is the answer to our lethargy, our complacency, our spiritual immaturity? Look to Christ.

We don’t hold on to our courage and hope by fixing our eyes on *people*. Many today do that. And that’s why there are so many relational difficulties at times in the gathered church, the house of God. People will always disappoint; Jesus will never disappoint. Get your eyes off of people and onto Jesus.

We don’t hold on to our courage and hope by fixing our eyes on *problems*. We all have problems. We have a special place for those who have no problems; it’s called a cemetery. But we don’t resolve the problems we have by focusing on the problem. We are rather to focus on a person, the *person* of Jesus Christ.

You know, so many today pull away from the gathered worshipping community of believers because of these two very things: people and problems. But in pulling back from the worshipping community, we are pulling back from Christ. The two go hand in hand. They are inseparable. You can’t be faithful *to* Christ without being faithful *in* Christ’s worshipping community.

So look to Christ. Recognize his superiority over anyone else or anything else that could stir your imagination, provide your motivation, or temporarily give you satisfaction. Don’t let anything or anyone be a substitute for the person of Christ in your life. Christ has been exalted above all things. Is he exalted above all things in *your* life?

However, in the next main section of the book, the focus becomes more specific, moving from the *person* of Christ to the *priesthood* of Christ. Here we see Christ’s *qualifications* as High Priest (5:1-10), his *office* as High Priest (7:1-28) and his *ministry* as High Priest (8:1 – 10:18). Everything in the first part of this letter is answering one question: What do we have in Christ? The answer? “We have such a high priest” (8:1) who is *for* us.

One of the most neglected aspects of biblical study and teaching these days is what Jesus is doing right now in heaven for you and me. Have you ever thought about it? We often talk about what Jesus did for us when he lived and died on this earth. And we talk some (maybe not as much as we should) about what Jesus will do when he comes back. But what about right now? What *is* Jesus doing right now, today, in heaven? The book of Hebrews has more to say about this than any other book of the New Testament.

What is Jesus, as our High Priest, doing right now in heaven? He is *identifying* with you and me. And one way that he does that is by helping us in trouble and temptation. That’s what the writer of this letter is saying in 2:18 –

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Hebrews 2:18

While the book of Romans deals with the righteousness of Christ, and the book of Ephesians deals with the fullness of Christ, the book of Hebrews deals with the *nearness* of Christ. He doesn't shout counsel to us from a distance. He is near. He identifies with us in our weakness and struggle. And that is why we need to have our eyes firmly fixed on Him.

After speaking of the superiority of the *person* of Christ, and the *priesthood* of Christ, the author now says, "Therefore, let us..." Let us persevere in our *life* in Christ, i.e. in faith (chapter 11), hope (chapter 12) and love (chapter 13).

Christianity is for both the mind and the heart. It touches our intellect, emotions and will. Orthodoxy (what you believe) should always lead to orthopraxy (what you practice, how you live).

But these final chapters are not the only place where the writer brings all of this deep, doctrinal truth down to everyday, practical application. Remember, this is a sermon. And as in most sermons, the speaker gives spontaneous application all along the way. He doesn't wait until chapter 11 to say, "Therefore, do this..."

Throughout this book, there are five sections that we can call "warning" passages. It's particularly in these passages that we find some of the sternest, most severe warnings in the New Testament.

- Pay careful attention (2:1-4)
- Enter God's rest (3:1-4:16)
- Go onto maturity (5:11 – 6:20)
- Draw near, don't give up (10:19-39)
- Don't turn away (12:25-29)

One thing is very clear in all these warning passages – the speaker is addressing *believers*, like you and me. In other words, the danger of drifting away, of turning away, of hardening our hearts, or of failing to enter God's "rest" is very real! Be careful...it can happen to *you*! It can happen to me!

You see, you don't just "chill" in the Christian life. There's no room for "treading water." You're either moving forward, or you're moving backward. In a small men's growth group that I'm a part of, one of our members described it as paddling upstream. The moment you stop paddling, you start drifting. Ever experienced that? I did once in some of the roughest white water of the gorges of central France. What happened? I lost in five seconds of sitting on my "duff" the ground (or should I say water?) I had gained in five minutes of paddling with all my might! And believe me, it's the same in the Christian life. Are you sitting still, going nowhere? No you're not! You might *think* you're sitting still, but you're actually drifting away! So be careful...don't drift, draw near! Don't turn away, but make every effort to enter God's promised rest, his rich reward for work well-done.

That's an overview of this brief "word of exhortation" give to these Hebrew believers and to you and me. But now, in light of that, the writer concludes with a call to prayer. First of all, he requests prayer (18-19). And then he offers prayer (20-21).

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon. Hebrews 13:18-19

"Pray for us," he says. And then in verse 19 "I particularly *urge you to pray...*" What motivates the writer to end this letter with a call to prayer for himself? First of all, he senses a need – in this case to be soon reunited with these believers. The person who doesn't sense his need for prayer is not in touch with reality! In Hebrews 4 he says that, since we have a high priest who has been tempted in every way that we have, yet without sin, "let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in *time of need.*" What is *your* need? And what is your first response in that need? Is it to turn to God in prayer and request prayer from others?

Second, he not only senses a need, but he obviously believes in the power of prayer. And so do the other writers of the New Testament. No less that five times in the New Testament, either by direct exhortation or example, we are told to pray for one another. As I said last week, we can do more than pray after praying, but we can never do more than pray before praying.

So are you hesitant to ask others to pray for you? Evidently, the writer of this letter wasn't. And you shouldn't be either. Share your needs with others. Ask for prayer and pray with others. Even as I was writing this message the other day, I had two different phone calls. Needs were shared. Prayer was offered...yes, *over the phone.* Why not? And beyond that, you can "email" your prayers. And why not text message your prayers? But by all means, let us pray for one another.

I believe one reason that more of us don't jump at the opportunity to pray more together as a church family is because of a shallow, stereotypical understanding of prayer. The Bible says that both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are in intercession for usⁱ and that as we pray, we are engaging in one of the most privileged opportunities we have as believers. We are joining our prayers with those of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as we come before the very presence of God the Father.ⁱⁱ

The writer requests prayer. But he also offers prayer. And I believe that the prayer he offers up to God for these believers gives us insight into how you and I should pray. Notice what he prays:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13:20-21

First, he recognized *to whom* he is praying. He is the God of peace who raised from the dead the Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep. Far too often, my focus in prayer is on myself, rather than on the character of the One to whom I'm praying. Here's the principle: *let the character of God shape the content of your prayers.*

Let me give you an example. The other day I allowed the content of this prayer to shape my prayers as I lifted up to God the needs detailed on our prayer sheet. One of our members was flying to Atlanta to care for a niece whose health is failing: “Lord, may your peace sustain our sister in Christ as she makes this journey...” Another one of our members has a broken foot: “God, you brought back our Lord Jesus from the dead...you are certainly able to bring healing in your timing and way in this situation.” Another member has asked prayer for wisdom in whether or not to start a new ministry: “Lord, as the great Shepherd of the sheep – sheep who are lack wisdom – guide this one into pastures of fruitful ministry.” That’s the principle: allow the character of God to shape the content of your prayers.

Secondly, let’s *pray for one another in keeping with God’s kingdom purposes*. Notice the request: May God “equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him.”

I find it interesting that, even though these believers were undergoing persecution and suffering, he *doesn’t* pray for their physical or material comfort. He doesn’t pray that God would deliver them *from* difficulty, but that God would equip them to do his will *in* and *through* difficulty.

Paul Tillich once described “the average American who uses God as hot water bottle.” When we feel pain, be it emotional, psychological, physical or relational, we pull God off the shelf and apply him to the pain. But when the pain goes, God goes too. I like how one of my favorite authors puts it:

“We have become committed to relieving the pain behind our problems rather than using our pain to wrestle more passionately with the character and purposes of God. *Feeling better has become more important than finding God*. And worse, we assume that people who find God always feel better.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This can even affect the way we pray. Do we pray “Lord, deliver me from this depression, this problem, or this pain?” Or do we pray, “Lord, help me see you *in* this depression, this problem, this pain?” Sometimes in this “in-between” time God wants to deliver us *from* the difficulty. But sometimes he wants to take us *through* the difficulty, with our eyes on him. Bottom line, the prayers that honor God are in the *name* of Jesus, for the *fame* of Jesus, and towards the *reign* of Jesus, and not first of all for our own comfort.

TESTIMONIES:

- What fresh insight has God given you through this study in Hebrews?
- In what *specific* way has God encouraged you through our study in Hebrews?
- In what *specific* way has God convicted/corrected you through this study?

Notes

ⁱ Romans 8:26; Hebrews 7:25.

ⁱⁱ An example of believers who fail to join their prayers with the intercessory work of Christ is found in Mark 14:31-38 as Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane: "And they came to an olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, "Sit here while I go and pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be filled with horror and deep distress. He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me." He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine." Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. "Simon!" he said to Peter. "Are you asleep? Couldn't you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak." Mark 14:32-38 NLT

ⁱⁱⁱ Larry Crabb, *Finding God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 18 as cited by George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 104.