

Sermon – 14/09/2003 am

The Great Shepherd

Study Text: Hebrews 13:20

We are coming to the end of the great book of Hebrews – this brief *word of exhortation* as it is called. Today we will look at the closing doxology, the prayer of the church leader for this group. This prayer is directed to the God of peace, the God who is the source and the giver of peace. The focus of the prayer is upon our Lord Jesus – upon his death and resurrection.

His resurrection has not been clearly stated in this epistle until now. We were told that Jesus went through the heavens and is seated at the right hand of the majesty (4:14) and that he lives forever (7:24). He is our great high priest able to understand our weakness and our temptations. He is able to help in time of need. But the resurrection was not clearly stated.

Also in this closing prayer he introduces the picture of Jesus as shepherd – the great shepherd. This metaphor is found of course in the Psalms and also in Isaiah 63. In the New Testament, Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd (John 10) and Peter uses this term in his letters. We will come back to this metaphor shortly.

God of Peace

We might expect to read ‘God of power’ here since the reference is to the raising of our Lord Jesus from the dead. In Ephesians 1:19-20 we read of his mighty power which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his Right Hand in the heavenly places. Instead he addresses his prayer to the God of peace. The God who gives peace on earth and peace to his people.

God of peace then may be a reflection of the dissension within this community. This verse is linked to the previous verses where we perceived such dissension. Peace with God and with one another may have been the greatest need of this church.

They were a church drifting away, falling away from the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. They were falling away from grace and were exhorted to come before the throne of grace to obtain mercy. Falling away from the grace of God means losing the peace of God in our hearts. *Through Jesus we have access by faith into this grace in which we now stand* (Romans 5:2). Going back to the old ways of the law meant losing access to the grace of Jesus Christ and to the peace of God.

God firstly grants us peace with God through Jesus Christ. We have peace with God because we are justified in the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus died in our place. He bore our sins so that God’s wrath was turned upon him as he hung on the cross. Believing in Jesus we are not longer condemned. No longer objects of wrath, but have peace with God (Romans 5:1).

Secondly having peace with God through Jesus Christ we have the peace of God in our hearts. Let the peace of God rule in your heart. *The peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ* (Philippians 4). This is like sanctification. This is the peace of

God that should be reflected in our lives, in the way we live and interact with one another. It is the 'shalom' with which we could greet one another.

Note the context of this verse in Philippians 4. What is it? There was some dissension, some disputation between two women in the church. Their names were in the Book of life but they were not at peace with each other. The Paul says rejoice in the Lord! He was not rejoicing in their disputation but rejoicing in the Lord who can settle all differences and bring peace to their hearts.

He goes on saying to pray and not be anxious. Sometimes it is anxiety that leads to disputes. The less anxiety we have the fewer disputes we will have. Pray he tells them and goes on telling them to meditate or to think upon pure, true and lovely things. And the God of peace he assures them will be with you.

This is just what the writer to Hebrews prays. He prays to the God of peace to perfect them. When we have the peace of God in our hearts we will be at peace with one another. The more Jesus by his Spirit rules in our hearts the more peace we will have.

There is a song that says:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Look full in His wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of His glory and grace.

Is that true? The more we see Jesus and are dazzled by his glory and grace the less we will be worried by what we see in this world. His light will dispel the darkness in our hearts caused by anxiety, worries and the momentary troubles of this world.

Great Shepherd

Looking to Jesus we are looking to the great shepherd of the sheep. The closer we follow the shepherd the less likely we are to fall into danger.

We have a little dog that we take for walks in the nearby bush land. Often there are big dogs also going for walks there. They strike fear into heart of our little dog. She used to start sniffing about in the grass and getting otherwise distracted – and so fall behind. Then if a big dog came along she just froze. She was too far back for us to pick her up for protection. She was vulnerable as the big dog came upon her. Now she has learnt to stay closer to us so that when a big dog comes we protect her.

It is very easy for us to get distracted and to fall back. We make ourselves vulnerable to attack from the evil one. Paul warned Timothy about getting distracted by foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. Rather let us hear the words of Jesus the great shepherd who said, *my sheep hear my voice I know them and they follow me* (John 10:27). *And I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand.*

What tremendous words of assurance. What more incentive do we need to follow Jesus – to follow him closely every day? *No one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. He is greater than all.*

Turning to our text we see the greatness of God in making Jesus our shepherd – our great shepherd. It was through his death and resurrection that he was made our shepherd. He conquered death and all the powers of evil. So he is able to protect us – if we stay close and follow him.

Why does the writer here suddenly call Jesus the great shepherd? It is thought he could have been reflecting upon the words in Isaiah 63:11. With reference to Moses, the prophet said, *Where is he who brought them up out of the sea, With the shepherd of his flock, Where is he who put his holy spirit upon them.*

Moses brought the people of God through the sea – the Red sea. This prefigured the resurrection. The sea is actually a place of death in Scripture – here the Egyptians were destroyed in the sea. Death itself was destroyed along with all Gods enemies as Jesus was brought up from the dead. We find a reference to baptism and resurrection in this context in I Peter 3:21 – there it is the antitype of Noah being saved through water.

The blood of Jesus in our text speaks of his death on the cross as a covenant sacrifice. His blood is the blood of the new covenant – the everlasting covenant. There will be no other covenant between God and man. This covenant is everlasting.

And it was through his blood or by virtue of his blood that he was raised from the dead. His sacrifice was perfect. God accepted that sacrifice, the lamb without blemish. God brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead. Our sins dealt with there on the cross, and all the powers of evil defeated in his victory over death.

Oh what a wonder is Jesus our Saviour. *Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (I Corinthians 15:57). Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Moses brought the people up out of the sea and led them in the desert. He was their shepherd. This church group was looking back to the old covenant, to the Law and to Moses as the shepherd. In Hebrews 3 the writer pointed out that in Jesus one greater than Moses had appeared. So here in these closing verses they are reminded yet again that in Jesus Christ they have one who is greater than Moses. In Jesus they have the great shepherd of the sheep.

The great shepherd will never die. He will never fail. He is the greatest, indeed the only one who can lead us into heaven.

Is Jesus your shepherd? Do you think he is great? Are you following him now – how closely? Remember how he became your shepherd – he died for you and God raised him up from the dead. Remember how you became his sheep. In his grace he called to you and you heard his voice. Are you still listening? Still praying – *Yours be the kingdom the power and the glory for ever and ever amen.*

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