

Week 12 Devotional™ Reading

## **A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews**

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## Faith in Action

*Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"* – Hebrews 13:1-6 ESV

The author ended chapter 12 with an exhortation to “be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken” and to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29 ESV). The same God who shook the landscape surrounding Mount Sinai and rattled the knees of the Israelites with His divine presence, is our God and has prepared a kingdom for us. So, what should be our response? Proper worship, reverence and awe. And to make it even more practical, in the closing chapter of his letter, the author illustrates what those things look like in everyday life.

Sometimes we are tempted to make our worship of God an external show for others to see. We confuse worship of God with the intensity of our singing, the verbosity of our prayers, the selflessness of our service or the generosity of our giving. But sometimes our love for God is best measured in our love for others. Worship of God that does not include love for others is hypocritical and insincere. So the author moves from grand descriptions of God as a consuming fire to a plea for brotherly love. “Let brotherly love continue” (Hebrews 13:1 ESV). Love for one another is an indispensable and non-negotiable requirement for anyone who claims to worship God. At one point in His earthly ministry, Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees, who posed to Him what they believed to be a trick question. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36 ESV). His intent was to entrap Jesus. The question he posed to Jesus was one that the Scribes and Pharisees debated regularly. They had numbered the laws of God and had come up with 613, 248 of which were deemed positive and 365 designated as negative. Then they had divided them two categories, the “heavy” or more important ones and the “light” or the less important ones. They wanted Jesus to tell them which one was the “heaviest.” And Jesus answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-38 ESV). Love God AND love others. According to Jesus, those two commands encapsulate the entirety of the rest of the law.

So, it is no wonder that the author of Hebrews told his readers, “Let brotherly love continue.” Then he took it a step further. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Hebrews 13:2 ESV). This recalls the parable of the good Samaritan that Jesus told in response to another inquiry from a Pharisee. He approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit

eternal life?” (Luke 10:25 ESV). Jesus responded with a question of His own, asking the man to tell Him what the law said. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself,” the man replied. Jesus commended him for his answer and told him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:28 ESV). But the man was not satisfied with Jesus’ answer and asked for clarification. “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 22:29 ESV). That’s when Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan. In it, He described what it truly means to show hospitality and kindness to someone who is a stranger and in need. It involves sacrifice. It requires a giving up of your rights and a commitment of your resources. The author of Hebrews echoes the sentiment of Jesus’ parable when writes, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Hebrews 13:3 ESV). Our love for God is best expressed by our love for others. The apostle John encourages us to compare the love Christ expressed for us with the way in which we love others. “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18 ESV).

Love should permeate all of our relationships, including that between a husband and wife. If we love one another, there is no place for adultery or immorality. We will always want what is best for the other person. Self-obsession or self-love is the greatest detriment to loving others. When we love ourselves too much, we are incapable of loving others. We end up putting into our relationships only to see what we can get out of them. They become self-serving rather than selfless. And it’s interesting that, in this context, the author warns against the love of money. “Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5 ESV). The love of money is self-directed. We love money for what it can do for us. And yet, to properly love others, our money may need to be involved. We may need to let go of our resources in order to best express our love. It was James who said, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” (James 2:15-16 ESV). Talk is cheap. Words cannot fill someone’s stomach or make them warm.

The walk of faith is to be future-focused, recognizing that the ultimate promise of God is our glorification and final redemption. We are to live with the end in mind. But our faith-walk is also to be God-dependent. We are to spend our days on this earth with a constant recognition that He is our provider and sustainer. That is why the author reminds us to be content, because God has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5 ESV). But not only are we to be future-focused and God-dependent, we are to be other-oriented. We are to live our lives with an outward orientation that puts the needs of others ahead of our own. When we love others, we are loving God. When we lovingly sacrifice for others, it is an act of worship to God. When we give up what we have for the sake of others, we are letting God know that we are dependent upon Him. All that we have comes from Him and is to be used for His glory and the good of others. Our constant attitude is to be, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:6 ESV).

## Advice for Living

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. – Hebrews 13:7-16 ESV*

Consistency. Constancy. Steadfastness. A determination to stay the course, unwavering and undeterred from the goal. That is the key characteristic the author of Hebrews encourages us to look for in the lives of those we follow, whose lifestyle and faith we emulate. Living the Christian life is difficult, and God never intended for us to do it alone. He has placed others within the context of our lives to act as role models and companions along our faith journey. Within the body of Christ there will always be leaders, men and women who act as guides along the way, providing us with invaluable insights into the Word of God and the way of faith. But the author warns us to “consider the outcome of their way of life.” Was theirs a life well-lived? Did they finish strong? Was their character consistent with their teaching? Did they practice what they preached? Or were they all over the map spiritually? Was their faith consistent and their walk steady? Or were they “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:14 ESV)? Our spiritual leaders should model consistency and steadfastness for us. They are to be like Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and forever. That does not mean our spiritual mentors, pastors, and teachers should have perfectly consistent lives, but it is an encouragement to seek out those who have lived long enough to have proven their confession has had time to show up in their character. Their creed has been translated into conduct. What they say they believe has had time to manifest itself in what they have become.

The author warns his readers, “So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God’s grace, not from rules about food, which don’t help those who follow them” (Hebrews 13:9 NLT). Man’s obsession with novelty is nothing new. We love new ideas, new fashions, new trends and even new teaching. We are naturally drawn to anything that sounds innovative or provides never-before-seen insights into living the Christian life. The early church, just like the church today, was constantly being bombarded with new and improved teaching about everything from who Jesus really was to how to grow in godliness. That’s why the author mentioned devotion to foods. There was evidently a teaching influencing the local church that encouraged abstinence from certain foods as a requirement for true spirituality. Paul had had

to deal with this very same thing. “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Colossians 2:16 ESV). He warned Timothy:

*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. – 1 Timothy 4:1-3 ESV*

There will always be those who claim to have new insights into God’s Word. They will boast of having received new revelations from God and teach a new and improved version of the truth of God. But we must always judge their claims by their character. We must learn to compare their teaching with that of Christ and His apostles. Anyone who brings in “new” teaching that in any way adds to or distracts from the grace of God or the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross is to be avoided at all costs. That is the point the author is trying to make with his somewhat cryptic statement: “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:10-11 ESV). His Hebrew readers would have easily understood his point. Under the old covenant, the priests were allowed to eat part of the sacrifice that was made. It was how God provided for them. But any animal whose blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat within the Holy of Holies was not allowed to be eaten but was burned outside the camp. His point was that Jesus was sacrificed “outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12 ESV). Only those who live according to the new covenant in His blood are allowed to benefit from His body and blood. Those who want to live under the old covenant of law and legalism are not partakers in the new covenant.

Our faith is to be in Christ and Him alone. Anyone who adds to that formula is to be avoided, not matter how novel, new and exciting their teaching may sound. We are to remain consistently faithful to the teachings of Jesus and those of His apostles. We are to live with our eyes on the future, “for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14 ESV). The gospel is more than 2,000 years old. It needs no improvement. It requires no new insights or innovative teachings to explain it. Through our relationship with Christ, “let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” and let us “not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Hebrews 13:15-16 ESV). New isn’t always improved.

## Loving Those Who Lead

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.* – Hebrews 13:17-19 ESV

In our culture, we tend to view leadership through a distorted lens. We aspire to leadership. We see it as something to be sought after and as kind of a reward for a job well done. Leaders are the successful ones, the over-achievers who have earned the right to be followed and all the benefits that come with their title. For many of us, leaders are not so much to be followed as envied. We covet their corner office and exorbitant salaries. We grow jealous of their prestige and power. And we dream of the day when it's our time to lead. This mentality, while mostly visible in the secular arena, can even make its way into the church, the body of Christ. But disrespect for leadership among God's people is nothing new. Moses found himself constantly questioned and blamed for everything. His own brother and sister tried to force him to share his power and authority with them. The prophets of God were all ignored, disliked, and treated like social outcasts – all because their message was not what the people wanted to hear. Jesus Himself was a victim of leadership loathing Himself. As long as He performed miracles, handed out free meals, and talked of a new kingdom, the people flocked to hear him. But as soon as He started talking about suffering, taking up your cross and dying to self, the crowds thinned out dramatically. When He entered into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, fresh off the heels of His raising of Lazarus from the dead, the people celebrated with great gusto. But when He was arrested, everybody scurried into the darkened corners, including His twelve disciples.

The author of Hebrews knew that people can be fickle when it comes to leadership, even in the church. So, he encouraged his readers to do three things: Obey, submit and pray. He knew that leadership was difficult and virtually impossible if those being led refused to follow. He also knew that reluctant or disgruntled followers could make the life of any leader miserable. Gossips, grumblers and discontented followers can become a cancer, spreading discord and disunity throughout the body. So, he encouraged his readers to obey and submit. The Greek word for obey is *peithō* and it means "to listen to, obey, yield to, comply with." But it also carries the idea of trust and confidence. As believers, we are to place our trust and confidence in those whom God has placed in leadership over us. We are to see them as hand-picked by Him. And we are to submit to them. The Greek word he uses is *hypeikō* and it means "to yield to authority and admonition." But it also means to stop resisting. When we submit to and obey the leadership God has placed over us, we are ultimately placing our faith in Him. We are trusting that He knows what He is doing and is working through those He has placed in authority over us.

Finally, we are to pray for those who lead us. It is easy to complain about leadership. We won't always agree with what they are doing or where they are leading us. But rather than question

our leaders, we are to pray for them. Theirs is not an easy job. And we must never lose sight of the fact that they will one day answer to God for how they have led. Leaders in the church answer to a higher authority – God Himself. They will have to give an account for how they have cared for the flock of God. It was Peter who warned the elders of the local church to “Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly – not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God” (1 Peter 5:2 NLT). Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28 ESV).

Leading the church of God is not easy. Shepherding the flock of God is a big responsibility. Do some Godly leaders lead in a less-than-godly way? Certainly. Do all pastors, teachers, elders and deacons always lead in the way that God would have them? Sadly, the answer is no. Moses was far from perfect. David had his flaws and failings. Solomon was wise, but not always the brightest bulb in the box when it came to leadership. But God had placed each of them where they were. Praying for our leaders is the best way to ensure that they become godly leaders. Obeying and submitting to them as having been placed over us by God is an expression of our faith in God. But we must never forget that godly followers are just as important as godly leaders.



## Peace, Power, and Provision

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

*I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you. – Hebrews 13:20-25 ESV*

It was Peter who wrote, “By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence” (2 Peter 1:3 NLT). And as he wraps up his letter to the Hebrews, the author echoes the same theme. As part of his benediction, he calls on God, the God of peace, to equip his readers with “everything good” so that they may be able to do God’s will. The Greek word translated “equip” in this passage is *katartidzo* and it means “to strengthen, perfect, complete, make one what he ought to be” (Greek Lexicon :: G2675 (KJV). Blue Letter Bible). It was also commonly used to refer to mending something that was damaged, such as setting a broken bone in order that it would heal properly. Part of God’s ongoing work in our life is to repair what sin has damaged. Our sanctification includes the process of healing us from the negative effects of sin. God has justified us, declaring us righteous in His eyes, but that is a positional or judicial status. It does not mean that we are sinless or morally righteous. It simply means that, because of our faith in Christ, God views us through the sacrificial blood of His Son, “the blood of the eternal covenant.” But as long as we live on this earth, God is constantly equipping, repairing and perfecting us, making us more and more like His Son.

The author refers to God as the God of peace. He is the God of *shalom*. God’s desire for us is wholeness, completeness, and a sense of oneness with Him. When sin entered the world, that shalom with God was shattered. But with the coming of Christ, God provided a means by which man’s peace with Him might be restored. Paul reminds us, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1 ESV). Writing to an audience made up of Jews, the author most likely had Jeremiah 29:11 in mind. It says, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” The word translated “welfare” is actually the Hebrew word *shalom*. This statement from God was given to the Hebrew people at the beginning of their Babylonian exile. It was a reminder that God was not done. He had not completely given up on them. One day He was going to return them to the land. But there is a yet-to-be-fulfilled aspect to this verse. God is not yet done with the people of Israel. He is going to restore them to a right relationship with Himself. They will one day enjoy shalom – peace with God. The Jewish believers to whom the letter of Hebrews was written were being reminded that they were

already the beneficiaries of this promise. They had been restored to a right relationship with God. But God was also working in them in such a way so that they might be equipped to do His will. God is always working in His children “that which is pleasing in his sight.” Paul put it this way: “For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (Philippians 2:13 NLT).

Power. The very same power that raised Jesus back to life from the dead, is at work in us who have placed our faith in Him as our Savior. Revitalizing, resuscitating, rejuvenating, restorative, resurrection power is available to us and at work in us. We have the power of God available to us in the form of the Spirit of God who dwells within us. Our ongoing transformation does not depend upon our own efforts and will-power. It is the work of the indwelling presence and power of God. Truly, He has “given us everything we need for living a godly life.”

One of the most amazing statements in this passage that can easily be overlooked and under-appreciated is his reference to “our Lord Jesus, **the great shepherd** of the sheep.” In that simple phrase, the author reminds us that the sacrificed Lamb of God has become our Great Shepherd. He died for our sins but rose again so that we might have life more abundantly. He gave His life so that He might guide us into new life. Jesus said of Himself, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15 ESV). Peter reminds us, “He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24-25 NLT). Our Great Shepherd found us wandering from the fold of God. He rescued us. He has healed us. And now He is guiding and directing us as we make our way to the glorious future God has prepared for us. He sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. From His place at His Father’s side, He intercedes for us. He watches over us. And one day He will return for us. “And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor” (1 Peter 5:4 NLT). It is for that day we are to live. It is for that hope we are to eagerly wait.

*For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. – Romans 8:22-24 NLT*

And while we wait, we enjoy peace with God, the presence and power of God, the guidance of the Great Shepherd of God and the hope of the eternal promise of God.