

Sacrifices of Praise

Devotional Reading: Psalm 146
Background Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-21

Hebrews 13:9-21

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so.

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.

¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do

not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

¹⁷ Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

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

²⁰ Now 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, ²¹ 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.

Key Text

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. —Hebrews 13:15

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 3: Christians and Sacrifice

Lessons 10–14

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Match elements of the old covenant with their new covenant counterparts.
2. Identify some ways that the new covenant is unlike the old covenant while being an extension of it.
3. Make a list of ways that he or she can improve on being a “sacrifice of praise.”

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Give It Up
- B. Lesson Context

I. Great Changes (Hebrews 13:9-14)

- A. By Grace (vv. 9-10)
- B. By Sacrifice (vv. 11-12)
- C. By Seeking (vv. 13-14)

II. Great Sacrifice (Hebrews 13:15-19)

- A. Continual Offerings (vv. 15-16)
- B. Obedient Submission (vv. 17-19)

I Need Help

III. Great Benediction (Hebrews 13:20-21)

- A. God of Peace (v. 20)
- B. God of Every Good Work (v. 21)

Conclusion

- A. Celtic Cross
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Give It Up

When a concert artist finishes an outstanding performance, the emcee might exhort an appreciative audience to “Give it up!” for the people on stage. This results in loud applause with whooping and hollering. In a traditional opera setting, one is likely to hear people shouting, “Bravo!” or even “Bravissimo!” These outbursts show recognition of excellence, expression of gratitude, and release of emotion for the concertgoer.

Christians find repeated encouragements in Scripture to offer praise to the Lord. Likewise, church services are full of singing, praying, and preaching that give praise to God. Why do we do this? What is the background and basis for Christian praise? The author of Hebrews teaches us that certain observances in the Old Testament demonstrate how our practices are both contrasting and parallel to the prescribed customs of the ancient people of Israel. By tracing these antecedents back to their Old Testament sources, we may better understand how praise is an essential element in our relationship with God today. Then, perhaps, we can “give it up” to the Lord, a full-throated expression of our praise and adoration.

B. Lesson Context

For the best understanding of an author’s writing, it is beneficial to know (1) who was writing, (2) who the intended recipients were, and (3) the reason for the correspondence. We don’t always have all three in all 27 books of the New Testament. Concerning the book or letter we call Hebrews, we do not have any of the three!

Many authors have been suggested for Hebrews. Hebrews 13:23 mentions the release of Timothy, a well-known companion of Paul. This fact may point to Paul as the author, but we cannot know this for certain—the letter is not in his usual style. It is likely we will never know the identity of the individual who wrote this book.

Regarding the identity of the recipients, the closing statement “Those from Italy send you their greetings” (Hebrews 13:24) is not detailed enough to help. Even so, the letter shows a level

of intimacy with the recipients that indicates the author knew the people of this congregation rather well.

There is no purpose statement in this letter as there are in Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; 1 John 5:13; etc. We must be satisfied with knowing that the early church valued Hebrews as authoritative, apostolic teaching that should guide the church and have its place in the New Testament.

Reading the book of Hebrews gives a strong impression that it was written to Christians of Jewish background who were wavering in their faith under persecution (Hebrews 10:32-34). They seem to have been thinking of returning to Judaism. The author confronted this error by explaining the relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament system. In so doing, the author shows how Christ surpasses every element of the Jewish system.

The author does that in a very Jewish way, respecting Jewish traditions and arguing from Scripture. But as we move to the last chapter of Hebrews, the writer switches from doctrinally heavy topics to practical application.

I. Great Changes

(Hebrews 13:9-14)

A. By Grace (vv. 9-10)

9. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so.

The author was aware that the audience had found themselves awash in *all kinds of strange teachings*. This phrase refers to teachings that contradicted the Christian gospel (compare Ephesians 4:14; Colossians 2:8).

The best defense against the false doctrine faced by the readers was to have *hearts* that were *strengthened by grace*. The word translated “strengthened” is also translated “confirmed” in Hebrews 2:3, a context of reliable witnesses, miraculous signs and wonders, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Staying on the right course meant avoid-

ing placing trust in *ceremonial foods*. This refers to the Jewish sacrificial system. Those various food offerings did not resolve the sin and guilt of God’s people permanently (Hebrews 9:9-10; 10:11).

What Do You Think?

Fight, flight, or freeze—which action should you take when in the presence of false doctrine?

Digging Deeper

Would your answer be the same in all circumstances? Why, or why not?

10. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

An altar in this context was a piece of equipment used by the priests for their sacrifices. Exodus 27:1-8 describes the altar of burnt offering as central to the Jewish system of sacrifices. The author employs this symbol of sacrifice to speak of a Christian reality, a sacrifice that does not need the *minister of the tabernacle* (priests). The altar of Christianity is the cross where Jesus yielded his body as the final, “once for all” sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:10).

B. By Sacrifice (vv. 11-12)

11. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.

Again, the author provided another analogy demonstrating extensive knowledge of the Jewish sacrificial traditions. On the yearly Day of Atonement, animals were killed on the altar of burnt offerings. Their blood was used in the day’s ceremonies, and some of their fat was burnt by the high priest (Leviticus 16:25). But the *bodies* of the sacrificial *animals* were taken outside the Israelite encampment and burned completely (16:27), thus completing the sacrificial acts.

12. And so Jesus also suffered outside the

How to Say It

Golgotha Gahl-guh-thuh.

city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

As with the animal bodies on the Day of Atonement, the sacrifice of Jesus took place *outside the city* at a place called Golgotha (Matthew 27:33). This detail demonstrates that the author was familiar with the city of Jerusalem and the site of Jesus' crucifixion. John, an eyewitness, records that the place of crucifixion was "near the city" of Jerusalem, meaning it was not inside the city itself (John 19:20). The parallel to the Day of Atonement was remarkable for the author. It served as another piece of evidence that while the sacrifice of Jesus was in concert with the Old Testament patterns, it was superior to them in the end.

C. By Seeking (vv. 13-14)

13. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

Figuratively, the author exhorted his or her readers to leave *the camp*—to go *outside* the city, the place that symbolized the way of the old covenant. There, they would bear *the disgrace* that Jesus experienced (compare Philippians 3:10-11). The author was well aware of the abuse his readers had suffered at the hands of those who were formerly their friends (Hebrews 10:32-34). But he does not try to keep them as believers in Jesus by promising that things will get easier—quite the opposite!

14. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

In AD 70, the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed at the hands of the Romans as they crushed the Jewish revolt. Some scholars believe that this verse implies that the city and the temple were already destroyed when Hebrews was written, based on the author's use of the word "tabernacle" (Hebrews 9:1-8) rather than the "temple." Other scholars believe the destruction was imminent at the time of writing Hebrews based on the author's references to the priesthood in the present tense (examples: 8:3; 10:11) and description of the old covenant as "obsolete and outdated" and ready to "disappear" (8:13).

In any case, the author knew that no city on

earth came close to matching the desirability and permanence of the residence of God. Still today, we wait for an eternal city, one *that is to come* (Hebrews 11:10, 16; 12:22). This great city is part of God's ultimate plan, the final establishment of a kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:27-28). As with the original readers of Hebrews, our present sufferings and trials as Christians are not representative of our future. We look to the great city that is to come (Revelation 21:2, 10).

What Do You Think?

What is one practical way to let others see your anticipation of the eternal city to come?

Digging Deeper

How can you help someone who is deeply troubled by current events do the same?

II. Great Sacrifice

(Hebrews 13:15-19)

A. Continual Offerings (vv. 15-16)

15. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

Given the nature and features of the new covenant, were the original readers without a temple, animal sacrifices, or direct fellowship with God? No. True, they no longer were to slaughter lambs or burn the bodies of goats. True, they were no longer to be satisfied with the rituals a priesthood would offer. But they had to realize that God's eternal plan was moving beyond such things. In that light, they were to *continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise*. That meant that praise was not merely part of annual holy days but part of the essence of their lives.

This praise was to be their own sacrifice, never to be compromised by the imperfections of priests or animals. Jesus had paid sin's price fully in his physical self-sacrifice. His followers now have the privilege of offering spiritual sacrifices as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5). One aspect is willingness to *profess his name*.

It is to be evidenced by *the fruit of lips* (Hosea

14:2). Praising God and confessing him as Lord are not identical things, but expressions of praise are saturated with words acknowledging who he is: the only and true God.

16. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

A form of the underlying Greek word translated as *to share with others* is translated as “fellowship” in numerous other passages (examples: Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3). The implication is that this was to be an ongoing expectation and a great joy for Christians intent on pleasing *God*. The idea is to gather and praise God in community. The readers must *not forget* this feature of gathering together (see Hebrews 10:25). Hebrews presents the worshiping congregation as “giving” rather than “receiving.” The question on Sunday is not to be, “Did you get anything out of the service?” but “What did you sacrifice back to God today?” (compare Philippians 4:18).

B. Obedient Submission (vv. 17-19)

17a. Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you

The author concludes by mentioning obligations toward leaders (here and in Hebrews 13:7, 24). These were not the civic governing authorities of Romans 13:1-7. Instead, the *leaders* were church leaders as evidenced by their task to *keep watch over you*. This task is explained more fully in Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3; etc.

Successful churches must have leaders and followers, not a chaotic situation where everyone prioritizes their own preferences, as in Judges 21:25.

17b. as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

Moreover, these church leaders are accountable to the Lord. Considering the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3-7, the leaders’ *joy* in the context of accountability is founded in the return of the 1 to the 99. The Lord is not satisfied with a 99 percent retention rate!

18-19. 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.

The spiritually mature writer of this letter is not above asking for prayer from his much less mature readers (compare Hebrews 5:11-14). It makes a difference when church leaders know that their people are praying for their fidelity in marriage, integrity in financial matters, and responsible living in civic life (Titus 1:6). The outside community often knows who leads a congregation. Those leaders must maintain an excellent reputation to effectively reach them with the gospel (1 Timothy 3:7). But the writer’s main prayer request is to rejoin with his or her readers.

What Do You Think?

How should your prayers for church leaders differ from prayers for civic leaders?

Digging Deeper

How do Romans 13:1 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2 inform your response?

I Need Help

“What’s your greatest weakness?” In interviews, this question has always posed a challenge for me. Being honest seems to risk a negative impression, yet honesty is vital. My Achilles’ heel is my reluctance to ask for help. The evidence is everywhere: a scratched refrigerator I insisted on moving alone, incomplete house trim from running out of time, and a strained back from solo efforts to shovel snow after a blizzard. These instances are just glimpses of the consequences I have faced while trying to mask my weakness.

The text of Hebrews reveals that its author—whoever he or she may have been—possessed extensive insight and a profound connection with Jesus Christ. But this person was human and faced a particular set of challenges. As such, this person voiced the need for divine assistance through supportive prayer from fellow believers in Christ. How does recognizing your weaknesses influence your personal and spiritual growth?

—J. M.

III. Great Benediction

(Hebrews 13:20-21)

A. God of Peace (v. 20)

20. Now 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,

After requesting prayer, the writer closes the letter with a prayer. It rehearses many of the major themes and teachings of what has been written (compare Hebrews 1:3-4; 2:9-10; 6:20; 7:2; 9:14-15; 10:19; 11:19, 35; 12:14).

B. God of Every Good Work (v. 21)

21. 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.

Unbelievers are transformed into believers so that they (we) can be enabled to do *everything good for doing his will* as a natural expression of faith in Christ. We do these good deeds not to earn favor or merits, but to be well pleasing to the Lord. Pleasing God became possible since he sees us *through Jesus Christ*, the “author and finisher” of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). There are no good deeds pleasing to God divorced from our faith and relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The prayer ends with a doxology, ascribing glory *for ever and ever* to Jesus Christ.



Visual for Lessons 12 & 13. Display this visual and ask, “How will you share the peace of Christ to your neighbors in the upcoming week?”

The writer ends with a Hebrew word, *Amen*, meaning “let it be true.”

What Do You Think?

Who can you help this week to be better equipped for the Lord’s tasks?

Digging Deeper

Who can you ask to be a mentor for your own equipping?

Conclusion

A. Celtic Cross

Christian tradition has produced many different styles of the cross. Each has its own symbolism and meaning. One of these is the Celtic Cross, which tradition says was introduced to the Irish people by Patrick, the fifth-century missionary to Ireland. In its simplest form, the Celtic Cross looks like a standard cross with a circle around its center. The cross represents the sacrifice of Christ. The circle represents eternity. Together, they speak of the perfect, eternal sacrifice of Jesus.

The book of Hebrews speaks of things in terms of eternity. As the Celtic Cross symbolizes, Jesus has provided an eternal sacrifice for us. He is our once-for-all-time high priest, without beginning or end. We wait for an eternal city. We have continual, eternal praise to offer to God, glory forever and ever. We have an everlasting covenant, the new covenant promised by the prophet Jeremiah. Why would we relinquish any of these blessings for old, inferior ways of relating to God? Why would trivial issues and distractions sidetrack us? May we continue to offer our praise to the Lord as a pleasing offering to him. This is sacrifice combined with eternity.

B. Prayer

Lord God, may the fruit of our lips be pleasing to you. May the words of our mouths be praise and recognition of your glory. May our praise be full of thanksgiving for the sacrifice of Jesus, your Son, to save us. We pray in his name, Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Offer the new covenant sacrifices to him.