

NEW BEGINNINGS FROM A CLOSING PRAYER (Hebrews 13:20-25)

Have you ever noticed that when one thing ends, it almost invariably leads to the beginning of something else? Let's consider a few examples.

The most obvious is graduation. We often call graduation exercises a *commencement*. *To commence* is to begin or start something. Properly understood, a graduation is not so much the end of something as it is the beginning of something else.

Every sports fan knows that when the regular season ends, the playoffs begin.

When the main course is consumed, that is when dessert is served.

Today, is the last message in a journey through the NT letter known as Hebrews. We began this trek the Sunday after Christmas last year. This is the 45th Sunday since then and my 41st message from Hebrews. One Sunday I was at my son's wedding. On Mother's Day I preached a message from another portion of God's word. The first Sunday in June, I went to Waco to a conference. Two Sundays later it was Father's Day, and I preached from Luke's gospel. Otherwise, we have focused on God's word to us from this letter. Now, we come to the end of this letter and this sermon series.

You have learned by now that after I end one series, I begin another. You may be wondering what my next series will be. You're not the only one.

The point is that when something ends, something else begins. The author of Hebrews ends his letter with a series of concluding prayers. Verses 20-21 contain elements of both a doxology and a benediction. The word *doxology* literally means *words of glory*. Those words are spoken in praise of God. *Benediction* literally means *good words*. They are words of blessing spoken over God's people.

In vv. 22-24, the author moves from praying vertically to praying horizontally. He begins with the words, "I appeal to you, brothers." When we pray to God, we make our appeal to Him, and when we appeal to others, we are in a sense praying to them. One of the dictionary meanings of *pray* is "to make earnest petition." Beginning in v. 22, the author of this letter earnestly petitions his readers.

Finally, he concludes the letter in v. 25 with a short prayer for his readers. I want to take these concluding prayers and use them as a template for what we need to begin.

Let Us Begin Anew to Worship the God of Peace

There are five other times in the NT where God is called the God of Peace. Let me read those to you:

- "May the God of peace be with you all (Rom. 15:33).
- "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20).
- "... Live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11).
- "... Practice these things and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9).
- "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely . . . (1 Thes. 5:23).

Interestingly, God is the substance of the very things we lack. God is truth, and we often lack an assurance of what is true and right. God is love, and we often lack a love that permeates all our relationships. God is peace, and we lack a peace that guards our hearts and minds. God is the supply for the very things we need. Whenever you have a need, look to Him because you will find in Him what you need.

One need we have is the need to worship. Whether we recognize it or not, man was born with a need to worship something or Someone greater than himself. Foolish man often seeks to meet his need to worship by adoring substitute gods. Have you ever been to a packed-out stadium or a sold-out arena for a sporting even or for a concert. You will find cheering fans standing with uplifted arms, and what they are doing looks a whole lot like worship.

On a much smaller scale, we have these hand-held devices, smart phones, tablets, or computers, and with them we can follow certain people on social media. We can read what they write, listen to what they say, stay abreast of what they do, and give ear to what they teach. It seems quite a bit like worship to me.

We need to worship, but our greatest need is to worship the One in whose image we were made, who is the very One who made us.

Let's worship with words the God who speaks. We can worship Him with spoken words, written words, sung words, and even words we think. King David wrote, "May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart by pleasing to You, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

I am sure that God is pleased when we feel thankful and when we feel a warmness of love towards Him, but words give content and expression to our worship.

When you come across a movie that you like or hear a song that you enjoy you will likely brag to your friends, "Have you seen this movie? Have you heard this song? It is wonderful! It is excellent."

Likewise, we need to brag on God to others and brag to God about Himself. That is worship.

Have you ever come across and child who is trying to communicate something. He points. He makes motions. Finally, you say to him, "Use your words."

The author used his words to brag about God being the God of peace. He also bragged about Jesus as being the great Shepherd of the sheep. Earlier, this apostle spoke of the leaders of the people. He told his readers to obey them and to follow them because "they are keeping watch over your souls." Pastors and preachers are human shepherds, but Jesus is our Great Shepherd. He is also the Good Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd

He is great because of who He is. He is the Son of God. He is the Savior of all who trust in Him. He is the King of Kings. He is also great because of what He did. He laid down His life for His sheep. He bled and died for us. It is by His blood that He established an eternal covenant. It is eternal because it cannot be broken, and it will not be replaced. God will be our God, and He will not let us go.

The apostle ends v. 21 with further praise of Jesus: "to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Let's follow this author's example. Let's worship the God of peace. Let's worship the

great Shepherd. If you have gotten lax in your worship, if you have gotten out of the habit, it is time to begin anew. Use your words to worship God.

Let Us Begin Anew to Bless Our Fellow Pilgrims

The prayer of vv. 20 and 21 are both a doxology and a benediction. As a doxology, the author praises God at the beginning and ending of the prayer, but the middle part is a benediction because the apostle is asking God's blessing upon the people who would read this letter.

What is he asking God to do? He is asking that God would equip them with everything good. *Today's English Version* renders that as "provide you with." That is a rather bland translation. The Greek gives us a more picturesque view. The word used here is the same word that is used in Matthew 4:21 where we are told that James and John were *mending* their nets. It is also used in Galatians 6:1 where we are instructed to take a sinning brother and *restore* him gently. In classical Greek, that word was used for setting a broken bone.

Just in case it has escaped your notice, you need to know that you and I are broken people. We need mending. As the apostle blessed the people, he asked God to mend us, to repair us, to fix us so that we can do God's will.

The apostle further asks that God would so work in us that we would become pleasing in His sight. Our job is not to fix ourselves nor put on some religious makeup so as to beautify ourselves in hope that God will like us more.

No. Our job is to be pliable clay in the Master's hand. He is the One who will shape us as He sees fit. The job of marble is not to help the sculptor out. The block of marble did not say to Michelangelo, "Let me assist you into making me into David or the pieta." No, Michelangelo was a master sculptor. His works were a result of his skill. The stone no more helped than did the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel aid him in painting it in such a brilliant way.

You don't need to help God. Just don't get in His way. Just don't work against Him. He is quite capable of making you into a thing of beauty that honors Him.

In the OT book of Psalms there are some psalms that are known as Pilgrim Psalms. Technically, they are called Songs of Ascent. They were sung by groups of Jews as they traveled upward to the City of Zion, to Jerusalem. As they went there for various feast days, they encouraged one another by singing these portions of Scripture. These psalms asked God to bless His pilgrim people.

Look for instance at Psalm 121.

The Jews were big on giving and receiving blessings.

I am told that as the of a time of worship was coming to and end, a Jewish priest would lift his arms, and he would hold his fingers in such a way that they portrayed the Hebrew letter *shin*. That is the first letter of the word *shalom*. *Shalom* was a standard Jewish greeting. We translate it as *peace*, but it had a deeper meaning than that. *Shalom* meant *wellness, wholeness, a deep sense of God's presence and blessing*. With arms uplifted, the hands make the letter *shin* for *shalom*, the priest would recite a

benediction, a prayer of blessing upon the people.

That, in a sense, is what the author of Hebrews is doing here toward the end of chapter 13. In chapter 12 he had invoked pilgrim language. In v. 22 of that chapter he wrote, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” The author is a fellow traveler, a fellow pilgrim. To his fellow pilgrims, he sings a song of blessing, he prays a prayer of blessing.

You and I are pilgrims. To use the language of John Bunyan, are traveling from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. In these travels we will encounter trials and difficulties and unexpected obstacles. As we travel, let us invoke God’s blessings upon our fellow travelers.

The apostle’s concluding prayer reminds us as we start a new leg of our journey to be mindful of both ourselves and our traveling companions. May God equip us, mend us, and make us beautiful in His sight.

Now, in vv. 22-24, the author moves from a vertical prayer to a horizontal one. He appeals to his brothers. He earnestly petitions them to do a couple of things.

Let Us Begin to Anew to Encourage Each Other

In what ways does the author encourage his readers? He asks them “to bear with my word of exhortation.” In other words, he is saying, “Listen; pay attention; give heed to what I have written to you.” The NLT reads, “Listen carefully to what I have said in this letter.”

He refers to his letter as being brief. I suppose that is a relative term. Of the 27 books of the NT, 22 are letters, and there are only three letters longer than Hebrews— Revelation, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. That makes it the fourth longest letter of the NT. Regardless of its length, the author wants his readers to digest it meaning. If we are going to grow strong as believers, we need more than a quick, occasional, spiritual snack. We need to take the time to eat hearty, spiritual meals.

This letter is designed to encourage believers to go forward with Christ, to not turn back. He encourages them to persevere.

In this 13th chapter, the author teaches the believers how to respond to their leaders:

- Remember your leaders (v. 7).
- Obey your leaders (v. 17).
- Submit to your leaders (v. 17).
- Greet your leaders (v. 24).

We, too, have a responsibility to encourage each other. After teaching on the Second Coming of Jesus, Paul instructs the believers in Thessalonica, “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thes. 4:18). Then, just 11 verses later, he again commands, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (5:11).

This past Friday I went to Stillwater to attend the funeral of a lady named Ginger. I was her pastor for 7 years. She was the wife of the long-time Minister of Music who is

also a professor of music at OSU. She was just 65. She was an extraordinary encourager to her three girls, and she was her husband's greatest fan.

As I was leaving, I ran into a lady named Lynn. Her husband, Joe, died while I was still in Stillwater. He had been one of my deacons. I said to Lynn, "I was just thinking about Joe the other day. He was such an encourager. He had the gift of encouragement." She agreed. A pastor could not have had a better supporter than Joe was to me.

Before I got out of the building, a lady named Beverly came up and gave me a big hug. She was wearing an even bigger smile. I told you last week how I had recruited a Pastor's Prayer Team who met with me each Sunday morning in my office before Sunday School. She was a member of that team. She, too, was an encourager.

You need Gingers and Joes and Beverly's in your life. You need to be a Ginger, a Joe, or a Beverly to someone else. Life is tough. The world can be a discouraging place to say the least. We need to counteract the negative influence of our world by practicing encouragement.

Ask God to put encouragers around you, and ask God to use you as an encourager in the lives of others.

Let Us Begin Anew to Seek God's Sustaining Grace

Notice the last verse of the letter, v. 25. Here the author prays one final prayer for his intended audience. He prays that God's grace would be with them all.

We don't know who wrote Hebrews, but I find it both interesting and instructive that in all 13 letters of Paul that found their way into the NT, he concludes them by asking that God's grace be with them all. This not just a throw away line. It is a meaningful prayer.

Paul also begins all 13 letters in a similar way. In each one, without exception, he writes, "Grace to you and peace." In both 1 and 2 Timothy he adds mercy. Those to letters wish Timothy "Grace, mercy, and peace." Regardless, grace is always first and peace is always last. The order is important. If you want to experience God's peace, you must first come to know and experience His grace. His peace is a result of His grace. This also means that all of Paul's letters begin and end with grace.

The final prayers of Paul and the author of Hebrews serve as a timely challenge for us to begin a new habit. We need to seek God's grace for ourselves and others.

In 2001 a film was released entitled *Wit*. It was based on a Pulitzer Prize winning play. It is about a single woman named Vivian and her battle with a terminal cancer diagnosis. She is an English professor, and she undergoes experimental cancer treatments. Those treatments prove to be unsuccessful.

In one scene, as Vivian is nearing death, she is crouched on her hospital bed, almost in fetal position. She is in pain and unable to sleep. Her college professor and mentor has come to visit her. She sits on the bed with Vivian. She places one arm over her, and with the other she reaches into a bag and pulls out a children's book and proceeds to read it to her dying, former student.

The name of the book is *The Runaway Bunny*. She reads:

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So, he said to his mother, “I’m running away.”

“If you run away,” said the mother, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.”

“If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.”

“If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, “I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”

The elderly professor turns the page and says, “Oh, look at that. A little allegory of the soul. Wherever it hides, God will find it.” She shows Vivian the picture of the mother rabbit fishing in a stream—a carrot dangles from the end of the fishing pole. She continues reading:

“If you become a fisherman,” said the little bunny, “I will be a bird and fly away from you.”

“If you become a bird and fly away from me,” said the mother, “I will be a tree that you can come home to.”

“Shucks,” said the little bunny. “I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.” And so, he did.

“Have a carrot,” said the mother bunny.

Vivian’s mentor closes the book and looks down at her. She discovers that Vivian has found that elusive sleep.

We serve a God who graciously loves us, and His grace is a grace that will not let us go. I am reminded of the last verse of Psalm 23: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me and the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (23:6).

As we come to the end of this letter, we are reminded that it is a time for new beginnings. If you are not where you want to be in your spiritual walk, you can begin again. The call and the opportunity to begin afresh and anew is built into the very structure of time itself.

With each sunset, the day comes to an end. It is followed by a sunrise and the beginning of a new day, a new chance to start over, a new opportunity to begin again.

Let this day be a day to worship, a day to bless, a day to encourage, and a day to seek God’s great grace.