



# THE RESURRECTION OF THE *Great Shepherd*

It has been said that the history of the Church can be regarded as the history of the interaction of God's people with His Word. Indeed it is fascinating to trace the way in which certain portions of Scripture or certain books have been interpreted. Take the Book of Hebrews, for example. When, in 1662 about 2,000 Puritan ministers in England and Wales were forced to leave their churches because they refused to agree to conduct worship according to the Prayer Book of the state church, the Anglican Church, many of these ministers preached deeply moving farewell sermons to their congregations. One of these ministers was William Bates (1625-1699), who would become a leading Presbyterian. The text that he chose for his farewell sermon on August 17, 1662, was the one that we are to consider in this article: Hebrews 13:20-21.

It was a very appropriate sermon for a minister about to be expelled by the state from his flock to expound to them. For it speaks of another shepherd, "that great Shepherd of the sheep," the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been raised from the dead by His beloved Father, never more to die, and who can adequately take care of all of His sheep.

Again, it was this book, with its central focus on the unique sufficiency of the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of His people that gave Martin Luther (1483-1546), just prior to the

Reformation, a biblical understanding of the fact that Christ's death for our sins is something which happened once and for all at the cross. As Luther rightly came to see, the death of the Lord Jesus is not being repeated in the Roman Catholic Mass week after week. Christ has died for our sins once and for all and the Father is utterly satisfied with His sacrifice.

It is this central focus on the death of Christ that partly explains the fact that while there are allusions made to the resurrection,<sup>1</sup> there is only one explicit reference to the resurrection and that is in Hebrews 13:20-21, the benediction that comes right at the end of the letter. Another possible reason why the author of Hebrews does not explicitly mention the resurrection is that he also focuses on the significance of Christ's entrance into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Christ's being in heaven at the right hand of God presupposes His resurrection.<sup>3</sup> But it is not until



**BY MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN**

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13:20-21, at the very end of the letter, that the resurrection is mentioned.

## THE GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

Before we look at what the writer says about the resurrection, notice the structure of the prayer in these verses.<sup>4</sup>

1. The One being invoked: “the God of peace”
2. The ground on which God is being invoked: God is the One who, “because of the blood of the eternal covenant, brought our Lord Jesus back from the dead”
3. The prayer requests: there are two: may this God “make you perfect in every good [work] that you might do the will of God” and as He does this, may “He work in us what is pleasing in His sight”
4. The basis for the prayer: the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ—“through Jesus Christ.”

As we look more closely at the substance of the prayer that the writer prays for his readers, we notice that he is essentially asking that “God may enable those whom [he]...is addressing to live the Christian life.” In other words, it is “a prayer for their sanctification.”<sup>5</sup> Specifically he prays for two things.

First, that God would “make you complete (*katartisai*) in every good thing so that you might do God’s will.” The verb *katartisai* has a wide range of meanings—“mend,” “restore,” “put in order,” “furnish,” “equip.” It is used, for instance, in Matthew 4:21 of the disciples mending their nets. And it is this word that Paul uses in Galatians 6:1 to tell the spiritually mature how to deal with a person who has fallen into sin—they ought to “restore” such a one. Again, it is this word that the writer of Hebrews uses to describe the worlds being “put in order” in Hebrews 11:3. The writer may well have chosen this word because of its wide range of meaning.<sup>6</sup> The general sense of the word here in Hebrews 13 seems to be to make complete by restoring or filling up what is lacking.<sup>7</sup> Thus we could paraphrase the prayer thus: “may God Himself fill and support the community with every good grace, [so] enabling them to do His will.”<sup>8</sup>

The second, and subsidiary, prayer request is that God

might so work in them—and the writer (“in us”)—that they, and he, would be able to do what truly pleases God. This prayer request assumes that ultimately only God can enable Christians to do that which pleases Him. Yet, in this pleasing God Christians are not at all passive. God is working in them as they seek to please Him and do His will. Augustine had it right when he prayed once: “O Lord, give what You command, and command whatever You will.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE GOD OF PEACE

Now it is in the previous verse, verse 20, that the author of Hebrews gives us, as it were, the reasons for his confidence in God’s ability and willingness to answer the prayer of verse 21.

God is described, first of all, as “the God of peace.”<sup>10</sup> The God who is being invoked is the God who gives peace. Now, when we hear the word “peace” we usually think of the absence of conflict between individuals and nations. This is not foreign to the biblical idea of peace. For example, in Hebrews 12:14 readers are admonished to “pursue peace with all men.” Yet, a passage like Romans 16:20 (“the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet”) clearly indicates that peace can be present without the absence of conflict. Or, given the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism in today’s western world, some might think of “inner peace” and tranquility of mind. Again, such an inner experience of peace is not absent from the biblical idea of peace, but it is not the main idea conveyed by this word.

The pre-eminent idea of “peace” here in Hebrews 13, and in the rest of Scripture, is of that peace which God establishes between Himself and man. In the Scriptures such peace entails “the sum of all true blessings, salvation.”<sup>11</sup> First of all, this use of the word “peace” presupposes that there is a state of war between God and the crown of His creation, humanity. Mankind was, of course, not created this way. But when the first man, Adam, disobeyed God, he plunged his entire posterity into a state of rebellion against God and death. Men and women are thus naturally enemies of God. They are not interested in what He desires and have no love for what He loves. And until God opened up a way of peace between Himself and them, they had no desire to end the conflict.

***What an encouragement in the face of the difficulties! Here is a God who can help us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, for He has shown Himself to be more powerful than one of the most fearsome of our enemies, namely, death.***

Then, how is this state of war between God and man ended? By nothing less than the shedding of the blood of Christ on the cross.<sup>12</sup> By the death of Christ, God's anger at disobedient humanity and their sinful rebellion is turned away and He is reconciled to all who put their faith in Christ crucified. Here, in Hebrews 13, this ending of hostilities is referred to as the "blood of the eternal covenant."

God has ever acted towards mankind by means of covenants. In the Old Testament, we have God's covenant with Noah, and then those with Abraham and Moses. In a sense, all of these covenants foreshadowed that covenant which would have no end and which has eternal significance. And as those covenants of the Old Testament were established by means of the shedding of the blood, so is this eternal covenant established by the shedding of Christ's blood.

In other parts of this letter, the author of Hebrews particularly stresses that the covenant that God established with the people of Israel under Moses as an earthly mediator was not a permanent covenant.<sup>13</sup> Jesus, as the eternal Son, is the only One who can be the mediator of an everlasting covenant. And this God has established through His death.<sup>14</sup>

Little wonder then that the author of this letter is confident of God's hearing and answering his prayer. He is the God of peace who has made peace with His rebellious creatures by giving His dear Son to die for their sin and so blot out their rebellion. If God did this for His people, will He not be desirous of them living lives that reflect what He had done for them?

## **THE GOD OF RESURRECTION**

God is also described as the One who "has brought up from the dead...our Lord Jesus." This clause emphasizes God's *power* to answer prayer. He is not only desirous of answering His people's prayers, but He is fully *able* to answer all of them. The God who is being described here in Hebrews 13:20 is the living, all-powerful God, for whom nothing is too hard. How do we know this? He has brought back from the dead the Lord Jesus.

Contrary to the claims of the Muslim holy book, the Qu'ran, where the claim is made that Christ did not truly die—actually an influence of the heresy of second-century

Gnosticism—the Scriptures uniformly assert that our Lord Jesus went down into the realm of death. He truly died. But, praise be to God, the God of peace raised Him from the dead on the third day. What an encouragement in the face of the difficulties! Here is a God who can help us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, for He has shown Himself to be more powerful than one of the most fearsome of our enemies, namely, death.

## **"THE GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP"**

Two final points. Notice that the One whom the Father has brought up from the dead, namely, the Lord Jesus, is also described as "that great Shepherd of the sheep." The language here recalls Isaiah 63:11-13a, in particular, verse 11.<sup>15</sup>

In Isaiah 63, God's deliverance of Israel and their leader Moses at the time of the crossing of the Red Sea is recalled. God led the people out of the bondage of Egypt through the leadership of Moses, who, take note, is also described as the "shepherd of his flock." With Moses the Israelites went down onto the floor of the Red Sea and passed through the water on either side, and God brought Moses and them safely up out of the sea.

Now, God's deliverance of Moses and the people he was leading at the Red Sea is a type of what God did for Christ, delivering His Son, not now from the waters of the sea, but from death itself. For God brought out Lord Jesus up from the dead, victor over the realm of death and hell. And His resurrection has tremendous consequences for His people. Because He lives, they will also live. If Moses can be called "the Shepherd of the flock" in Isaiah 63:11, how much more is our Lord Jesus to be rightly described as the "great Shepherd of the sheep," the One who has passed through death into life.<sup>16</sup> And will not this great Shepherd lead His people into paths pleasing to God the Father?

Then, Christ's resurrection is a key proof that His death has been accepted by God.<sup>17</sup> The great Puritan commentator John Owen (1616-1683) puts it this way:

Had not the will of God been satisfied, atonement made for sin,...the law accomplished,...Christ could not have been brought again from the dead. ...The

**ENCOURAGING LETTER FROM FERMIN WHITTAKER**

“Over the years I have reflected on the experiences at Toronto Baptist Seminary. There is no question in my mind but that God orchestrated this journey. I remember vividly the warm reception I received from you [Dr. Adams] and the good folks when I arrived as a young man from Panama. Your kindness, friendship, love and prayers sustained me while I was in Toronto. Over the years the memories of yesterday have encouraged my life....

Today in my eleventh year as CEO/Executive Director for the California Southern Baptist Convention of 2,100 congregations, ministering in 60 languages, I give God all the glory and honour. We have seen over 1,400 congregations started in 10 years, but the needs are great with 33 million un-churched Californians. I covet your prayers as we seek to reach the lost and make disciples for Christ.

Yours for souls,  
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**“But the bringing again of Christ from the dead... is that which gives assurance of the complete redemption and salvation of the church”**

death of Christ, if he had not risen, would not have completed our redemption, we should have been “yet in our sins;” for evidence would have been given that atonement was not made... But the bringing again of Christ from the dead, “through the blood of the everlasting covenant,” is that which gives assurance of the complete redemption and salvation of the church... [This] is the foundation of all...communications of grace to the church...<sup>18</sup> 

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1 For these allusions, see n.2. Also note the mention of Isaac’s “resurrection” in Hebrews 11:19.

2 See, for example, Hebrews 1:3; 4:14; 6:19-20; 7:25.

3 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13 (Word Biblical Commentary, 47B)*, Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 561. See also the remarks of C.E.B. Cranfield, “Hebrews 13:20-21”, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 20 (1967), 438, n.2, as to the reason for this solitary reference to the resurrection.

4 On the structure of this prayer, see Alexander Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood. Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 427. As Nairne (*Epistle of Priesthood*, 427-428) and F.F. Bruce [*The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1990), 387] note, this prayer has the general structure of what has come to be called among the churches of the West a “collect.”

5 Cranfield, “Hebrews 13:20-21”, 439.

6 Cranfield, “Hebrews 13:20-21”, 440.

7 Alexander MacLaren, *The Epistle to the Hebrews (Chapters VII. to XIII.)*; *The General Epistle of James* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 848.

8 Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 564.

9 *Confessions* 10.29.40.

10 For other references to God as the God of peace, see Romans 15:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23. It is interesting that this way of describing God is never used in the Old Testament. It seems to have been primarily a New Testament way of talking about God.

11 Cranfield, “Hebrews 13:20-21”, 437.

12 See Colossians 1:20. For a somewhat different perspective, see Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 560.

13 See, for example, Hebrews 8:7-13.

14 In this regard, look at Hebrews 9:13-15.

15 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Thomas L. Kingsbury (1871 ed.; repr. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Klock & Klock, 1978), 399; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (2nd ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1965), 448; Cranfield, “Hebrews 13:20-21”, 438; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 561; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co./Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1993), 728; David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2000), 511. Pace Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 406.

16 Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 562.

17 Delitzsch, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 400; Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 727-728.

18 *Hebrews*, 7:476-477.