

6/6/10

Exhortation: The great shepherd

Reading: Hebrews 13

Once more we come around this table of our Heavenly Father's provision for us in Christ. Once more we are confronted with these emblems upon the table, which speak to us of the continuing love of our God and our Lord. Once more we are brought face to face with the realities of the tremendous price that was paid for our redemption, which show to us the depth and the full extent of that love.

Hebrews Chapter 13 and verses 20 – 21

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen”.

Here our Master is described as the “*great shepherd of the sheep*”, a title which relates to the outworking of his atoning sacrifice, we have each come to remember today. During his ministry, before his sacrifice our Lord was the “*good shepherd*”, a title, which emphasises his superiority over the religious rulers of his own day to be the true shepherd of our Heavenly Father's flock.

But now, our beloved Master is the “*great shepherd*”, the emphasis here is upon the uniting of the whole flock into one, both Jews and Gentiles together, as a result of his sacrifice.

Ephesians Chapter 2 and verses 13 – 16

“But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the stake, having slain the enmity thereby.”

We brethren and sisters are a few of those other sheep in John ten that have been brought into the one flock through the blood of the everlasting covenant. This is emphasised for us in verse twenty by the simple phrase “*the sheep*”.

Now back in John chapter ten where we have the good shepherd narrative. There are five occurrences where we find the Master declaring that He will give his life for the sheep (**verses 11, 15, 17 & 18 twice**). Now the first four of those are in the present tense in the Greek, indicating that He not only had his imminent death clearly in mind. But also his entire life had this focus of showing great care and love for the sheep.

Now the final occurrence of the Master declaring He will lay down his life for the benefit of the sheep is in the Aorist tense, indicating to us the continuing nature of his life being laid down. Here we see the ongoing work of the Master, as the great shepherd. Still on one hand gathering, adding individuals out of every nation, people and tongue to the flock, but also in his leading them towards the kingdom of God.

The Master's leading of the flock divides into two parts, firstly as all power has been given him in Heaven and earth and He is far above all other forms of authority. He is preparing this current evil age for his return, bringing the nations into the alignment the Father requires to bring about fulfilment of his purpose.

Secondly the Lord Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent example to the flock of not only how to be a shepherd, but also what are the qualities of a healthy and excellent sheep. So from his ministry we learn how the Master submitted to his Father and so provided us with the perfect example to follow.

Philippians Chapter 2 and verses 5 – 8

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the stake.”

Yet our Lord Jesus Christ is also termed in the New Testament the “*chief shepherd*”. In 1st Peter chapter five there is an exhortation to all those in authority to exercise that authority as under-shepherds following the example of the one we shall shortly remember.

1st John Chapter 3 and verse 16

“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

Brethren and sisters whether we have positions of authority within the ecclesia to serve or not, we are all required to be living sacrifices laying down our lives one for another.

Some three times within Hebrews chapter thirteen the Eternal Spirit through the writer mentions those that have rule over you (**verses 7, 17 & 24**). The Greek word for “rule” mean’s “to lead, to go before” in other words to shepherd and to provide an example for others. This is clear from the later part of verse seven.

Verse 7

“Whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Or reflect on the outcome of their lives and imitate their faith” (NET Bible).

The implication in this verse is that we are only to follow those shepherds who are faithful. Yet any brother or sister who is faithful provides leadership and functions as a shepherd, whether in a position of authority or not.

The simple fact of life is this – that there is always someone else looking to us for leadership. We must all aspire to provide the best leadership we can to feed the flock of God.

In the eighth verse we read “*Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever*”, which encourages us all greatly brethren and sisters. Our Lord **the good, great and the chief shepherd** is still loving and caring for the sheep. As we read elsewhere “*because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them*”.

His example encourages us likewise to be consistent in the outworking of our faith day by day, as we seek to both follow in our Lord’s footsteps and to lead after his example. Yet consistency brethren and sisters is undoubtedly our greatest difficulty. We seem to be able to achieve it in certain areas of our lives, for short periods at a time, but in others it is sadly altogether fleeting. We all find it difficult due to the nature we bare and the distractions of life to have the focus and the determination to be truly consistent.

In verse twelve we are introduced to our great shepherd’s focus:

Verse 12

“Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.”

Here we see the focus and the desire of the one we have come to remember in these emblems of bread and wine before us upon the table. A desire born out of love for his Father that sought to fulfil his will and to consecrate to our Heavenly Father those who are his flock.

We see here a determination that his suffering and the giving of his life would accomplish the victory required. Finally we see the tremendous price paid by our Lord Jesus Christ. Even his precious blood, given freely despite knowing before hand the price to be paid and indeed enduring the most intense suffering and cruelty.

Interestingly that word “*sanctify*” in this form in the Greek is only found in one other place, which speaks of the ongoing work of the Master and our spiritual sacrifices rendered in loving response to what He has done for us.

Ephesians Chapter 5 and verses 25 – 27

“Even as Christ also loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

Although this is presented to us in the context of marriage, there is undoubtedly an ecclesial association, which we all would do well to follow brethren and sisters.

No wonder then verses thirteen to seventeen calls for certain responses to these things.

Verses 13 – 17

“Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”

Since He suffered physically and emotionally, we ought to bear some reproach.

Indeed as He was called upon to submit, so are we to authority, as God decrees.

Yet the main thrust of these verses is one of sacrifice on our part, here we see our participation in the atonement not in the sense of adding to it. Which can neither be done or is necessary brethren and sisters. Rather we participate in the atonement by showing its efficacy in our lives thereby truly demonstrating that we believe these things and again in doing so we provide sound leadership.

These sacrifices come in two senses firstly in the negative, in the giving up of our own will and pleasures, joyfully. By following our Lord and regarding ourselves as strangers and pilgrims in the earth. Then secondly in a more positive sense by actively seeking and performing various acts of service.

The positive sacrifices speak of both worship and service patterned upon the priesthood of our Lord.

- Praise and thanksgiving
- Do good and distribute

These sacrifices are all based upon the peace offerings in the Law and speak of fellowship with our Heavenly Father through the sacrifice of his beloved son. That fellowship, which is also so fittingly featured in the bread and wine before us now.

Now the order of these two couplets is important brethren and sisters. Praise and thanksgiving generate a desire to reciprocate the blessings given to us in Christ and so ought to lead to doing good and to distributing in fellowship. Like faith and works these two couplets form a dynamo effect redounding to the glory of our Heavenly Father.

It's easy to see how in doing good to others and by distributing in fellowship what someone else needs in an act of service is in fact a sacrifice, a sacrifice in terms of time and resources. We might ask in what sense are praise and thanksgiving a sacrifice?

Well praise and thanksgiving are also a sacrifice of time and resources, but more importantly they are an acknowledgement of our place, our need and our dependence upon our Heavenly Father. In effect praise and thanksgiving are sacrifices of our pride our independence.

What is also interesting here is that under the law a person went and offered his peace offering and it was just them personally and the priest, but here we see these sacrifices are spoken of in community, with the phrase “*let us*”. This point is further enhanced if you have a margin where it will give for thanksgiving the alternative “*to confess*” the name of our God.

To confess the name is to speak aloud concerning the person, the attributes and the purpose of Yahweh our Heavenly Father. So when we confess his name we do so in community. Such praise, confession and thanksgiving are indeed then the fruit of our lips, rendered in Hosea as the calves in the sense of sacrifices.

Hebrews Chapter 10 and verses 24 – 25

“Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Now these sacrifices brethren and sisters are not to be a once off response to the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather we read in (verse 15) “*continually*”, just as the evening and the morning sacrifices amongst others under the Law. Think about it brethren and sisters the efficacy of our Lord’s sacrifice is ongoing until our final transformation. Likewise in this dispensation we will always need to do good and to distribute in fellowship.

Yet even in the age to come we shall at least still have the first of these two couplets of praise and thanksgiving for what has been achieved in our Lord Jesus Christ for us. So these sacrifices must be continually in our individual and ecclesial lives brethren and sisters, because in the performing of them two things are achieved.

Firstly we read in verse sixteen “*for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*” Now it is an incredible thought that we, even in our weakness give the creator of heaven and earth pleasure. That He condescends to such a level that He would take pleasure in the little sacrifices we make for him.

Why exactly is this? Well the key really is in the word “*well pleased*”. The Greek word is only found in a slightly different form in two other places in Hebrews:

Hebrews Chapter 11 and verses 5 – 6

*“By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he **pleased** God. But without faith it is impossible to **please** him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”*

Such sacrifices please our Heavenly Father, because they manifest faith in Him and in his promises. Indeed within any loving relationship the desire of each party is to do those things which please one another. How much more then brethren and sisters should this be the case with our selves with regards to our Heavenly Father, who has so fully provided for us in Christ?

Now we said the practice of these sacrifices also achieved another end, other than just pleasing our God. Yes the continual application of these sacrifices is one of the means of transforming our way of thinking, our characters and our actions to be more like the one we shall shortly remember. This is the very point being made in verse twenty-one:

Verses 20 – 21

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Again brethren and sisters we find ourselves looking at the current High Priestly work of our beloved Lord. The sacrifice we each have come to remember brethren and sisters opened the way to our transformation in Christ Jesus. Ephesians records “*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works*”. To this we can add these words from Philippians “*that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*”

One of the ongoing tasks of the Master then, as the great shepherd is to perfect each one of us to perform those good works, which, were before ordained that we each should walk in them. The question comes to us then brethren and sisters can you and I believe this? And if we believe this can we walk in them to the glory of our Heavenly Father through Christ Jesus our Lord?

Philippians Chapter 2 and verses 13 records

“For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

Thus both the desire and the strength to so walk comes from the Father to us through the sacrificial and ongoing work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Master as the head of the ecclesia providentially moves events within the ecclesia’s and within our personal lives to facilitate this. In tandem with this outworking is our own part in the process that of allowing our Heavenly Father to so work through his Son and this is achieved by our personal adherence to his word.

2nd Timothy Chapter 3 and verses 16 – 17

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”

This is achieved *“by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”*. So then brethren and sisters if we want to show the efficacy of the Masters sacrifice in our lives, let us firstly apply ourselves to his word and also let us secondly offer these sacrifices given here for us in Hebrews thirteen. For in doing so, we will present our bodies as living sacrifices, which after all is our reasonable service and our reasonable worship.

As we come now then to break bread and to drink wine in remembrance of our Lord’s sacrifice, that sacrifice that constituted him the great and the chief shepherd. Let us see in the bread that body prepared that one true sacrifice for sin. For we also acknowledge that this bread before us stands as a symbol of the Master, as the word made flesh our example to imitate of a life of total sanctification.

Likewise let us brethren and sisters see in the wine the symbol of the precious blood of the good shepherd given for the sheep. Let us also acknowledge the great price that was paid. A price, which our Heavenly Father was only too willingly pleased to pay, because of what it would accomplish through his son, even our complete redemption.

Let me finish with these words of comfort also in Hebrews chapter thirteen. *“For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.”*

Wayne Marshall

