

Faith Sustaining Encouragements

Hebrews 13:22-25

When someone becomes a parent they go through a number of different stages.

There is the newborn stage.

This is the stage where the child is completely dependent upon the parents for everything.

It is the stage of changing diapers, round the clock feeding, trying to figure out why the baby is crying (Michelle was amazing at that, me not so much), there are car seats, bibs, playpens, cribs, and many other things to try and figure out.

Before long the baby starts crawling, figuring out a few words, and in what seems like an instant they are walking and they enter the toddler stage.

It is a different kind of busy.

It is putting child proof latches on doors and cupboards, installing baby gates, running up and down the hallway, they start eating baby food, learning lots of words, playing with more toys, colouring, and tonnes of other things.

When you stop and think about all the things a child learns from the time they are born until about age four it is absolutely astounding.

The toddler stage is following by the adolescent stage.

In these years the child starts school and begins to gain a bit more independence from mom and dad.

These are the years of learning to ride a bike, starting to ask some more substantial questions about life, their personality continues to grow and be shaped by their experiences.

After that they hit the teen years.

I don't have much experience in these years yet, but I know enough to know there is usually increasing independence in this stage of life.

Many teens get jobs, they start figuring out what they want to do with their lives, they learn to drive a car, hopefully they begin to learn responsibility, and hopefully they learn to make faith in the LORD Jesus their own.

After the teen years come adulthood. This is where they go off to college/university, start a career, and leave home.

I've watched some parents go through that and we are a finger snap away from it.

From what I can see it is a bitter sweet moment.

It is hard to let them go, but there is also joy and thankfulness that by God's grace they have grown up and have become mostly independent.

I say mostly independent because no matter how old a child becomes they are always your son or daughter.

Once you become a parent you are always a parent and if you have any sense at all of what the LORD expects of you as a mother or father then you will always have the deepest of love for your children and you will always feel a sense of responsibility for them no matter what.

Having spent a significant time in the book of Hebrews, I believe there are a good number of parallels between the parent/child relationship and the relationship the writer has with the people of this church.

It is like the author has watched these people grow up spiritually, he is seriously invested in them wanting them to walk faithfully with the LORD.

As he brings the letter to a close in chapter thirteen he goes through a flurry of final thoughts.

It's kind of like parents saying their goodbyes as a child gets into the car to strike out on their own and the parents offer a few little reminders, a few life lessons so that they will make it on their own.

This morning we come to the last of those at the end of this letter.

[Turn in your bibles again this morning to Hebrews chapter thirteen beginning at verse 22 to the end of the chapter. One of the chief concerns of this letter is that these believers would continue on in their faith. The writer desperately wants them to stick the incomparable greatness of Jesus and towards that end as he brings this letter to a close he gives them four faith sustaining encouragements. Things he knows they need in order to continue on as believers. First, he shows them and us that...]

Point #1 – Believers must give patient attention to faithful instruction.

The only way to grow in biblical knowledge and wisdom is to consistently engage our heart, mind, and will for the purpose of putting ourselves under the authority of God's word.

Verse 22 is very interesting.

It begins with a plea followed by a command.

We can see the plea right there at the beginning of the verse it says, "Brothers, I urge you."

That word can also be translated as beg, encourage, or request.

It has the sense of asking from the depths of his heart.

The fact that a command, which he is about to give, is preceded by a plea like this tells us something very important about commands that have to do with saving faith.

It tells us in order for this command to be obeyed for the good of the hearer, then it must be a decision that the one receiving the command makes.

We need to keep that in the forefront of our mind as we listen to the command. Here is the command (Verse 22).

If you have been with us for most or all of our series through the book of Hebrews then you know there are some hard things written in this letter.

There are no punches pulled here and he is pleading with them to bear both the hard and glorious truths of this letter.

It is an easy thing to close up our ears or head for the door when we are confronted with truth that we don't like.

You can easily find someone who will say what you want to hear.

You can take a nap, or you can fill your mind with distraction.

Here's the problem, your soul is at stake.

You cannot despise the word of God and be saved because the nature of someone born again by the Holy Spirit desires what the LORD commands.

When he says, "bear with my word of exhortation" he is likely talking about the whole letter of Hebrews.

Notice how he describes it at the end of the verse. He calls it a short letter.

No doubt some would have disagreed with calling this a short letter.

Reading it out loud would take about an hour and a good bit of the material is weighty, it is sometimes difficult to understand, and sometimes difficult to hear.

For many of us it feels like a long read and listening to 38 sermons may feel long.

But there is so much more that could be said about the glories of King Jesus that it is impossible to capture in countless books let alone thirteen short chapters.

It is not that long and it is very much worth your attention he says.

[I've coached basketball a few times over the years. I've noticed a bit of a theme in the teams that I have coached. Kids don't like to pay attention in practice. They just want to play. "Practice", they say, "is boring". Do you know what happens in a game when the team doesn't put out a good effort in practice? They get humiliated by teams that do work hard in practice.]

It is like that in the Christian life.

If we are unwilling to give careful attention faithful instruction, then our resolve to follow Jesus will be weak at best and will not endure.

This is why he pleads with his readers.

You can force someone to be in church and have the sound of the word of God enter their ears, you may even be able to force someone to offer lip service to God, but you can't force someone to believe and love the truth.

You have to want to do that. You have to resolve to give your attention to the Scriptures.

[I know the world is calling. I know there are countless options for entertainment that seem on the surface far more interesting the listening to the Bible. I know there are long lines of people who will tell you exactly what you want to hear, but none of those things will lead you to everlasting life and joy. Don't be satisfied so easily with trite things, but rather give patient attention to the faithful instruction of God's Word so that you may see the wonders of God. Secondly...]

Point #2 – Believers must trust that God will see them through all things.

The Lord is neither ignorant of nor powerless in any aspect of our lives and if we truly know and believe that, then our faith is built on an immovable foundation.

Verse 23 has some good news for these believers (Verse 23).

The words "I want you to know" translate another command from the original language.

Most literally translated it would be "Know our brother Timothy has been released."

By putting this in the form of a command it stresses the necessity of the information.

It is more than a matter of passing along good news, although it is that.

It is more than a matter of, "Hey, you will be happy to know that Timothy has been released".

It is that you need to know that Timothy has been released.

Why is that so important for them to know?

We can only speculate here because he doesn't give us any information about Timothy's situation.

It could be that he was set free from jail. Perhaps he was set free from an illness. Could be he was stranded somewhere.

We simply don't know. The question is why mention it here at the end of the letter which is so focused on their continuing on in the faith?

While we can't be 100% certain it seem as though the most likely answer is Timothy has faced some kind of hardship from which he has been set free and it is also likely that his hardship was on account of his faith in Jesus.

The hope is that Timothy will arrive and be able to accompany the Author of Hebrews to go see these believers.

Why is he going to do that?

We know from other parts of the New Testament that Timothy is a pastor and evangelist and so it seems most reasonable to say that he and the writer would be traveling to the church to encourage and build up the believers there.

Knowing what we know about Timothy, how would he respond to the question, "Timothy, how did you get through whatever trouble you were in?"

It is safe to say that his response would be, "God kept me in my time of hardship."

"Timothy, how were you set free?"

Surely he would say, "God set me free!"

They needed to know that.

Clearly, part of what is threatening their perseverance is times of trial.

They need to hear about God's sovereignty and faithfulness in difficulty.

[I feel like I hear about people getting lost on a somewhat regular basis. Someone goes for a hike or something like that, they get turned around and lost. Imagine that is you for a moment you are out in the wilderness with no provisions and no idea where to go. How are you feeling? Scared? Discouraged? Maybe hopeless? No imagine a helicopter flies overhead and sees you and is able to communicate that they see you and help is on the way. How are you feeling now?]

You know sometimes in the Christian life we can get to feeling like a lost hiker without any hope.

It is precisely in those moments that we need to remember that our God sees us!

We are never lost and we are never alone.

It is precisely in those moments that we need to remember that the LORD alone is God Almighty.

Someone might say, "But you might lose everything, you might even die."

Where is God in that?

He is right there with you through it all and He gave the life of His Son Jesus Christ so that neither calamity nor death will have the final say over you.

[Whatever kind of prison we may find ourselves in, it is only temporary if we hold on to faith in the Son of God who died and rose again to redeem us from our sins. The Lord will see you through, the Lord will set you free. Here is a third faith sustaining encouragement...]

Point #3 – Believers need Christian affection.

Loving one another is more than an obligation for disciples of Jesus Christ, it is one of the ways we are sustained in the faith.

Final greetings like the one we read here in verse 24 were common in the ancient world and we can see that in many of the New Testament books.

While this practice was common, it is a mistake to think that it is the product of mere habit.

It is good to remind ourselves that what we read in the Bible is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit.

While an unbeliever may sign off a letter like this as a matter of mere cultural formality, an author inspired by the Spirit is writing with a genuine desire for the good of God's people.

That is clear from what is said here (**Verse 24**).

No one is to be left out of this greeting.

He has a desire to send his regards to absolutely everyone in the church.

We still do this today when we bump into people, sometimes when we write emails or letters, or when we are talking on the phone with someone.

If we know the person we are talking to and we know their families we say something like, “Say hi to your family for me.” Or “Give my love to so and so.”

Even if it is just a cultural formality at the very least it indicates we know them and have some kind of positive relationship.

I believe there is more than formality in the greetings of Holy Scripture.

Here is a pastor who has been passionately pleading with these people and he wants to make sure that they know he cares about them and that other believers care about them.

That is always important to the Christian, especially in times of struggling, even struggling with one’s faith as these people were.

To be reminded that there are other believers that care about you is a life giving and faith sustaining gift.

[Remember Elijah when he ran for his life to Mount Horeb? He says to God, “I have had enough, LORD, take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” If you know his story then you know he had good reason to be discouraged. One of the ways that the LORD encourages this faithful prophet is by telling him there are seven thousand others in Israel who are on his side. He is not as alone as he thinks he is.]

For these struggling Christians to hear from this writer and to know that he cares about all of them, and not just him but other believers as well is something they needed to hear.

It is something we need too.

It is critical to remember though that this is a two way street.

Too many of us live with the expectation of receiving the greetings, of being the object of the affection.

We hide in a corner or at home and expect people to reach out.

Sometimes they do and that is good, but sometimes people need to hear from us as well.

Somewhere along the way this pastor had learned of their situation in the church and reached out to them out of Christian affection which they needed.

[It’s the very same with us. Every single believer is commanded to love other believers. That’s as basic to Christianity as breathing is to being alive. It is one of the hallmarks of true conversion because that is the very nature of the Holy Spirit living in those who have been born again. This giving and receiving of super natural affection is one of the means by which we are sustained in our faith. There is one more faith sustaining encouragement from this text. We need to give patient attention to faithful instruction, we need to trust God to see us through all things, we need Christian affection, and...]

Point #4 – Believers must consciously live in the grace of God.

Jesus said, “I am the vine you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Doing the commands of God and enjoying their eternal benefits is all a gift from God and we should constantly remind ourselves of that.

Just like the giving of final greetings, we find concluding remarks like verse 25 all through the New Testament.

We must be careful to avoid the mistake of allowing the commonality of these words to diminish the magnitude of them.

Listen with me to the final few words of a letter written to sustain the faith of believers with the realities of the incomparable greatness of Jesus (**Verse 25**).

To say that the book of Hebrews has laid out for the believer a high calling is an understatement to say the least.

Even just to embrace and strive for the few things we have reflected on this morning is an impossible endeavor on our own.

We will not listen with any kind of earnestness on our own, we will not trust God on our own, and we certainly won't love one another on our own.

All of these things and every other command given in the Bible are lived out by the Grace of Almighty God.

Grace is simply and undeserved gift.

We don't deserve to be saved. We don't deserve to enjoy the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We don't deserve anything except the eternal wrath of God.

These final few words of this letter bring that to our mind.

Oh how desperately we need the grace of God for everything.

It is far too easy to think of the grace of God as being primarily about the moment of our salvation.

That moment we come to God broken over our rebellion against Him. That moment we realize we deserve His judgement, that moment we understand that despite all our evil God loves us, Jesus died for us, He conquered the grave for us, and God offers the gift of forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

All of that is received by grace through faith. We don't deserve it at all.

Grace goes farther than that however.

We are forgiven by Grace and we are also made new by God's grace.

We would do well to take some time and try to think about everything that can rightly be called good in our lives.

I doubt any of us could make a complete list, because as we struggle against our sinful pride we tend to be blind to our need of grace.

Nevertheless it is good for us to try and think of all the things that can rightly be called good in our lives and remind ourselves all of it comes by the grace of God.

We are not going to make it to the end holding on to faith in Jesus because we are strong, or smart, or good, or anything else.

We are not going to be more like Jesus in the future because of our own wisdom or resolve.

Those things will happen by the Grace of God alone.

We must have that in our minds constantly.

Do we? Do we consciously live in the grace of God?

No Christian is exempted from this need. He says, "Grace be with you all!"

Imagine how our lives would be different if we had the grace of God on the front burner of our brains every day?

How many angry words would never be said? How many sins would lose their appeal? How much anxiety and fear would be lessened? How much complaining would disappear? I could go on and on but most importantly how much would our love and appreciation grow for the LORD Jesus?

These are the things that sustain us in the LORD.

Careful attention to faithful instruction.

Trusting God in everything.

Giving and receiving Christian affection.

And, living in the Grace of God.

Imagine the glory that our lives would bring to Christ if these things were true of us.