

A Better End

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of December 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better End and is based on Hebrews chapter 13 verses 20 to 26.

You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 979 from the reading that we had from the letter to the Hebrews chapter 13 beginning at verse 20 at the bottom of that page.

And let's pray as we come to God's word together. A God, our heavenly Father, thank you that you're a God who speaks to us and reveals yourself and your purposes and plans for us in the words of the scriptures.

And we pray now that you'll speak to us, to our hearts, that your words will be written there and that you'll work in us so that we do everything good for the glory of you and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 0 6] Amen. There are plenty of self-help books around in our bookshops, in our shopping centres and so on. Books that say how to do something, they give you the instructions to do it and at the end they more or less say now you can do it.

So do it. So you can find, no doubt, discussions or books or pamphlets on something to how to execute a cover drive. I've only ever succeeded once.

I still relive the cover drive that I drove at a cricket match in Bowerall once. It's the only time I've ever done it well and I live on that memory. Or you can find a book that'll tell you how to stop a souffle from falling, give you all the instructions and then say now you can do it.

Go ahead, do it. I've never done that. Or how to be a concert pianist in five easy lessons or something like that. Well, the only concert I've ever played for was a sort of little family affair when I was about 12 and well, it's hardly a concert pianist career.

How to be the complete person. Probably need 20 steps to do that. At the end of the book, these are the instructions, now you can do it. So, go ahead, do it. All these books are very positive books.

[2 : 1 7] All these books are saying to us that if you follow these instructions, you're able to do now what these instructions lead you to. Well, the Bible is positive.

I often marvel at how positive the Bible is about our destiny and so on. But never are we told simply, now you can do it, so just do it.

You see, that Nike slogan, just do it, doesn't actually work in the Bible. Because though the Bible is positive, it recognises that in the end, we can't always just do it.

Now, take the letter to the Hebrews, which we've been studying through this year in the sermons in the morning services, on and off. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, like the rest of the Bible, is masterfully positive about our eternal destiny, our salvation in Christ, about God's glorious promises and his faithfulness to keep those promises.

So we've read through Hebrews that the work of Christ on the cross and his resurrection and his ascension to heaven is so totally and absolutely complete for us that salvation is sure, guaranteed.

[3 : 27] Our entry to heaven is there for us all the time. We've been told that our souls are anchored in heaven for us by Jesus who's gone there before us as our great high priest, the one who intercedes for us.

Indeed, so positive and complete and final is the work of Jesus for us in the letter to the Hebrews that we need no other mediator, no other sacrifice, no other priest, no other saviour, no other help.

It's all done for us totally, finally, fully in the Lord Jesus Christ. So it's a very positive letter. And though there are many exhortations through the letter of how we are to live in response to what God has done, so for example, we remember, run with perseverance, the race set before us, looking to Jesus, draw near to the throne of grace with confidence and find help in your time of need, hold fast to our confession, don't fail to enter God's rest, don't refuse the one who's speaking, that is God, and other exhortations like it.

Though there are those exhortations for what we must do, never simply is it the case in Hebrews, you can do it, so just do it.

Because at the end of the day and at the end of the letter, as throughout, it is not simply a case of well now you can do it. Now you can do God's will. Now you can do everything good.

[4 : 55] Because that Nike slogan doesn't work in the scriptures. At the end of the day, the writer knows that for all the instruction he's given and all the exhortations he's given to do it, he prays that God will enable us to do it.

Because we can't without God. You see, from the beginning of our Christian lives to the end of our Christian lives, it is God's work that we're to rely on.

It's God's work to save us and bring us into a relationship with God and each day and each step that we make as Christians, it's God's work. And when we do good things, it's God's work.

When we persevere in Christian faith, it's God's work. It's not simply a case that the scriptures or the letter to the Hebrews has said to us, this is what you're supposed to do in your life, now go and do it.

Because it knows that we in the end can't. And so the writer of this letter finishes with a prayer that God will work in his readers' lives so that they may do it.

[6 : 01] You see, it's so easy to rely on ourselves. To say, yes, the beginning of my Christian life, that was God's work. He saved me but now it's my response. But we can't rely on ourselves because the scriptures from beginning to end of Christian life is saying to us, we rely on God at every point.

It is his work in us that enables us to do his will. And so we must pray as this writer does at the end of this letter. It's not just simply a matter of learning things but praying and relying on and trusting in God's work in us.

It's interesting to see the model of ministry that the writer of this letter shows us in this last chapter. If you remember back to last week, there was the exhortation to hold fast to true teaching and not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching.

So the writer has modelled the true teacher and that's a primary role of Christian ministry. But it's not simply the Christian minister, that's all they do is to teach because the other aspect fundamental to Christian ministry, which the writer now shows, is prayer.

You see, if all a Christian minister does is teach, then so easy is it to rely on their teaching for effectiveness. But the right and true Christian pastor teaches as best they can but prays because they know that in the end it's not their teaching on their work, it's God's work.

[7 : 35] And so through this letter, amazingly he says in verse 22, I've written to you briefly, well we've had 21 sermons, maybe he's briefer than I am preacher.

but he's taught what he calls briefly the truths but he prays because he knows that God needs to act if the truths that he's taught take effect in the lives of his readers.

In the ordination service for ministers in the Anglican Church it's the same sort of thing. It is the ministry of word and prayer and so Christian ministers, vicars, pastors, whatever are to be teachers and prayers for their people not just teachers and not just prayers either.

So my task as the vicar here is to be the teacher of God's word to preach God's word soundly and faithfully but also to pray and if I stop praying then I start relying on my teaching and not on God.

So the staff are regularly praying for each person here praying through the names in our purple address book of contacts of people who come here regularly and in writing the Christmas cards that are now in your pigeon holes for regular attenders I've prayed for every person over the last however long it's taken which is late at night most nights.

[9 : 00] Our job as ministers is to teach and to pray and that's what the writer of this letter models through this letter and at the end of it with this prayer.

The prayer that he prays in verses 20 and 21 is also instructive for us about how we should pray because it has a model a structure of his prayer that I think is one that we should copy more often than we do.

See his prayer in verses 20 and 21 addresses God firstly that's the person to whom we pray God secondly before it actually asks for something it acknowledges something about God it's a bit like a statement of praise but it is grounding the prayer in something of God's character and or God's action so you'll see in verse 20 and we'll come back to it in a minute he prays now may God but it's the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant that's the grounds for his prayer an acknowledgement of something about God's character and action thirdly then he actually prays his prayer beginning of verse 21 make you complete in everything good that's basically his prayer he's praying to God to make his readers complete but then he adds a purpose to his prayer so verse 21 continues so that you may do

God's will working among us that which is pleasing in his sight and then having stated his purpose he finishes by directing the glory to God if you like this is the ultimate purpose of his prayer that God through Jesus Christ is glorified forever and ever that's a good model I think for prayer so when we're praying for ourselves or for others we think about addressing God acknowledging something about God that is helping us think through what we're praying for and then we state the purpose of why we're praying what we're for and the reason I think this is a good model of prayer is that it balances our acknowledgement of God's goodness with our need but it makes us think through what it is about God that is provoking me to pray this thing and it is stating the purpose which will help us analyse are we praying this prayer for good reasons or not or are we praying it for selfish reasons for example here the prayer is for the glory of God in many respects every time we pray it ought to be for the glory of God and not for our own selfish needs or desires as well it makes us consider the character and purpose of God by praying in this way interestingly most of what are called the collects in the

Anglican prayer book are prayed around this sort of structure an address to God an acknowledgement of something about God a request and a purpose for the request which leads to the glory of God it's a good model for prayer and I think if we use it more often we'll actually sharpen the sorts of things we pray for and give us more confidence in praying for the things we pray for as well notice too that the writer is not just saying to his readers I'm praying for you that's good encouragement he's actually telling them what he's praying for them which I think is even better encouragement so often when we're praying for other people it's good to tell them that we're praying for them that is an encouragement maybe it's even better to say what we're praying for them so it's not just you know like Christopher Robin at the end of that poem called Vespers in one of the A.A. Milne books God bless mummy God bless daddy we've thought through and we've got a bit more content to the prayer that we're praying for other people and we encourage them by telling them what we're praying for well then the content of this prayer in verses 20 and 21 firstly he prays to the God of peace for Christians who are the original readers of this letter we've seen in recent weeks facing opposition and persecution no doubt lives under threat and in some form of turmoil to pray may the God of peace peace is a wonderful reassurance that their relationship with God is at peace despite the turmoil on earth peace is something that

[13 : 31] God is the source of and God has established with these readers when they became Christians so they have peace with God they're no longer at enmity with God and so they may face enmity with other people round about but more fundamental and more enduring is the fact that they have peace with God he's the God of peace so the prayer begins with a note of confidence and reassurance of comfort if you like to Christians under threat and then he prays something to do with the grounds of his actual prayer he acknowledges that God is the God of peace and what has God done there's lots of things he could have mentioned but the thing that he particularly mentions here is God raised Jesus from the dead now may the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus here is a note of strong confidence in the power of God see if this was a writer who doubted the resurrection like some Christians and some Christian ministers do he'd have no confidence for praying the sort of prayer that he goes on to pray but his confidence in God raising Jesus from the dead is the grounds of his prayer and indeed as he tells his readers what he's praying he's giving them confidence too and encouraging them notice that he says he brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus not that we own Jesus but that Jesus owns us we're in a relationship with him his readers are in a relationship with Jesus Christ so it's not a remote action of God raising Jesus Christ 2000 years ago but he's raising our Lord Jesus Christ that Jesus is alive not still in a tomb rotting and dead dead and of course if he's writing to Christians who are facing potential threats to their life under persecution possibly in the time of Nero the emperor in the 60s AD then here his resounding note of confidence is that God has conquered death death is not the final statement Jesus has been raised from the dead to heaven as he said in earlier chapters so if you're facing death here is a note of confidence that God raises people from the dead and as he raised Jesus he raises the followers of Jesus too from the dead well next he goes on to call Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep he doesn't call Jesus that elsewhere in this letter but he does so here the implication of course is that we're the sheep Jesus is our shepherd the great shepherd that is he's not just a shepherd like the kings of the old testament or the prophets and leaders of the people of the old testament they were failed shepherds even the good ones like

David was a failure as a shepherd at some level same for Moses who is also called a shepherd of God's people in one of the prophets Jesus is the great shepherd and so often in this letter to the Hebrews we've seen that the people and institutions of the old testament are good Jesus is better where in the old testament you have a high priest Jesus is the great high priest you might have a sacrifice in the old testament Jesus is in effect the great sacrifice and so he is the great shepherd of God's people and that means he is one who protects provides guides feeds they're the basic things about the shepherd in the scriptures and not just thinking physical food and homes on earth and stuff it's talking about a spiritual home and spiritual food for eternity Jesus is the great shepherd the one who leads not just into green pastures and still waters here on earth as the psalm says but he's the great shepherd who takes us to our heavenly home to the ultimate green pastures and still waters now the power of God that he's acknowledged at the beginning of this prayer is as the end of verse 20 says by the blood of the eternal covenant blood is how you would sign a covenant treaty perhaps to show its formality and that you are serious about it so mention of the blood of the eternal covenant is God saying

I keep these promises I sign it with my blood in effect but the blood is Jesus blood shed on the cross in his death for us that sacrificial death on the cross 2000 years ago and as we've seen in this letter it's the power of that blood the power of the cross of Christ that is sufficient to take us to heaven to perfect us for a relationship with God forever and it talks about the eternal covenant covenant is a formal agreement or treaty between two people God is saying I will keep the promises I make I'm signing off on them here by the power of the death of Jesus by the power of his blood in the old covenant of the Old Testament as we've seen in this letter in chapters 8 and 10 for example good promises made by God of a land and temple and sacrifices and so on but temporary promises shadows pointing to the ultimate promises which is the eternal covenant the promise of heaven the promise of a long lasting permanent relationship with God in his very presence in heaven for eternity that means God is saying here that his relationship with his people is unbreakable it's eternal nothing can separate them from

God and so the blood of the eternal covenant is reassuring the readers that their relationship with God will never be broken and because God raised Jesus from the dead even death cannot break the relationship between God and his people now what also I think the writer is saying here is that God is signing sealing or stamping his approval through the death and resurrection of Jesus when you arrive in another country and come up to the customs desk usually if you arrive at those intimidating countries like England and the ferocious customs people of Heathrow who must be the rudest people in the world let me say I stand there almost with fear and trembling thinking for some reason they may not stamp my passport and let me in to their precious kingdom and there's a sense of relief when the customs person actually stamps the passport and hands it back and you can walk through the gate

[20 : 12] Jesus' resurrection from the dead in the words of this verse 20 is like God stamping with approval his eternal covenant with us it's God stamping with approval and saying I accept his blood shed for your forgiveness and your salvation for eternity that's God's public stamp of approval his signature on the end of the document if you like to say you're mine forever I accept Jesus' work I've raised him from the dead to show that I accept it and nothing can break now this eternal relationship and eternal covenant I've established with you now these are grounds of great confidence in this verse this little verse verse 20 before the writer has even got to ask for what he's praying for he's established huge confidence that he has in God and that his readers ought to have in God and that we ought to have in God who's raised

Jesus Christ our Jesus Christ the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant the grounds here for us for eternity are sure are rock solid and now he goes on to pray and his prayer is simple to make the readers that God will make the readers complete that he'll make us complete their issue as we've seen from beginning to end of this letter is that they're drifters faith drifters some of them are drifting away from Christian faith for different reasons partly under persecution and so there's this danger that they are in effect incomplete and some of them have done good works as we saw in chapter 10 but have stopped doing them they're incomplete and so he prays that God will make them complete and the word that's used for complete in some context is used for restore and repair so what perhaps he's saying here in particular is that if God makes you complete he's actually restoring you or repairing you back into a relationship with him that's his prayer for these faith drifters who are readers of this letter and he's making and he's praying that God will make you complete in everything good not just in some things not that you'll have you know strength on the on side but you're not particularly good on the off side or that you'll have a strength in in serving but not receiving serve or something like that like sometimes we hear sportsmen they've got a weakness but their game in other areas is strong no the prayer here is for Christians to be complete in everything good not just in some areas of our life but in everything good that's his prayer it ties in a bit with last week what we saw back in verse 9 and so on there we saw how important it was that the readers of this letter Christians have their hearts strengthened by grace to do good things and so here in effect is the prayer that that may happen that God will make the readers complete so that they do everything good the examples of doing good we've seen earlier in a chapter two weeks ago mutual love in verse 1 hospitality verse 2 remembering those in prison verse 3 honoring marriage verse 4 keeping your lives free from the love of money verse 5 doing good and sharing what you have verse 16 they're just examples of what is doing what it is to do good but the writer is praying that God will work in their hearts so that they do everything good not just pick one of that list that I just read but to do everything good to honor marriage and keep your lives free from money and show hospitality and remember those in prison and express mutual love and not either or it's to do everything good and in fact that's what this letter is all about this letter is not really all about teaching us things about God and Jesus though the bulk of the letter is content to do with that always the scriptures and the letter to the Hebrews is no exception is to lead us to do everything good that which is pleasing in God's sight that's why the scriptures are here for us but we'll only ever do everything good if God works in us and so we're directed constantly to God and to Jesus Christ so that our hearts will be strengthened by grace by God's grace to do everything good and that which is pleasing in God's sight so if then from beginning to end of the

Christian life it is God's work then it is the glory that goes to God and that's how this prayer ends in verse 21 that God may make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will working among us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ to whom be the glory forever and ever at the end of the day if a Christian perseveres in Christian faith the glory goes to God if one day we are generous and share what we have the glory goes to God if we let mutual love be expressed and continue the glory goes to God because it's God who works in us for those things to occur so every time we love God and love our neighbor every time we express mutual love and honor marriage every time we keep ourselves free from the love of money every time we share what we have it is God at work in us and the glory goes to him not to us there is no place ever any day any moment of any day to think to ourselves I've done it I've achieved it I've done a good deed always and ever is the glory to go to God and notice that it's glory to God through Jesus

Christ it's a bit hard to know exactly at the very end of verse 21 when it says to whom be the glory is that to God be the glory or to Jesus be the glory and the writers who comment on these verses in a sense are divided in the end it doesn't matter because all the glory that goes to God is glory that goes to Jesus there's no other glory that goes to God and it's a glory that is shared between Jesus and his father in heaven there's no competition between them for glory so the glory that goes to God is always glory that goes through Jesus Christ it's very easy to fall into a trap of self-adulation in a way our society is full of it praising people for all sorts of ridiculous acts and honouring them and elevating them to legend statuses and all this sort of rigmarole and rubbish for Christians there's no place for that sort of stuff every good deed the glory goes to God and not to us because it's God who's working in us to do that to make us complete to do everything good that which is pleasing in God's sight it's not the case that that Christian life begins with

God's work in us and then we're left to our own devices to persevere and do good things not at all is God's work from day one to day end in our lives and that's why the very end of this letter says grace be with all of you because what we need is the grace of God to strengthen our hearts to enable us to do everything good it's God working in us his grace and so we know in the end the the simplest prayer but the most sufficient prayer is simply the prayer that grace be with all of you because God's grace is sufficient it's grace is that's led me safe thus far and grace will lead me home is the language of one of our hymns and the language of the Bible we can persevere in Christian faith and we can do good deeds not because we're strong but because God works in us not because we've been taught but because God works in us to apply what is taught well through this amazing letter to the Hebrews we have seen time and again the majesty grandeur of the

[28 : 26] Lord Jesus Christ it's certainly a letter about him he if you remember way back to February chapter 1 the final word of God in these last days also in chapter 1 it is Jesus Christ who's the creator of the heavens and the earth the one whom angels worship in chapter 2 we saw that Jesus is the pioneer of our salvation the one who was made perfect through suffering and we saw also in chapter 2 that it is Jesus who became flesh that he might die in our place and free us from the fear of death Jesus we saw in chapter 3 is superior to Moses as a son is superior to a servant in chapter 4 Jesus we're told and taught was a sympathetic high priest who opens the way for us to the throne of grace Jesus in chapter 7 is the one who saves for all time those who draw near to God through him he's the mediator of a new covenant in his blood in chapter 8 a covenant which is written on our hearts to enable us to do it unlike the old covenant in chapter 9 we're taught that it is the blood of Jesus that purifies not only ourselves ritually but our consciences our souls and spirits if you like from dead works to serve the living God chapter 9 we saw that it is the sacrificial death of Jesus that puts an end to all sacrifices once for all by his more powerful sacrifice the beginning of chapter 12 taught us that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him put aside endured the cross and despised its shame and sat down at the right hand of God and last week we saw in chapter 13 earlier on that Jesus suffered outside the gate that he might sanctify God's people by his own blood and we also saw two weeks ago earlier in chapter 13 that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us but will always help us he's there for us in our need by the power of an indestructible life as we saw in chapter 7 what a glorious set of truths that is about

Jesus Christ and that's why this writer prays as he does that hearts and lives strengthened by the grace of Jesus by the total final full and sufficient work of Jesus in dying for us rising ascending to the right hand of God the Father and interceding for us there as the great high priest that's all we need God's grace in Christ is sufficient for us for now tomorrow for eternity that's all we need and that's why he prays as he does that the truths that he's taught will be worked out in the lives of his readers that they may be complete to do every good work now may the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant make you complete in everything good so that you may do God's will working among us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ to whom be the glory forever and ever is that what you want prayed for you do you want prayed for you that God will make you complete in everything good that you may do God's will and do what is pleasing in his sight giving the glory to God through Jesus

Christ forever is that what you want prayed for you if you do you may like to stand and I'll pray it for you you don't have to stand but you may like to stand as you ask God for these things in this prayer and I will pray that for you now may the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will working among us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus

Christ to whom be the glory forever and ever Amen Grace be with all of you Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen