**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (13): The Book Of Better Things**

**“The Risen Christ, The Great Shepherd of the Sheep”**

**Hebrews 13:20-21**

**Resurrection Sunday**

**March 31, 2024**

During my growing up years I must have sat through hundreds of sermons from a number of preachers. Early on, of course, I didn’t have much of a choice. In our small community church my mother was the organist, and my father was one of the trustees and Sunday School teachers. So every time the church doors were open we were there.

Since there wasn’t any children’s church at that time, I learned to listen to those sermons when I started kindergarten. After all, if I was old enough to be in school, I was old enough to be in church – every Sunday morning and a few years later, every Sunday morning *and* evening. That’s two sermons a week, each and every year, until I left home and went to college. That’s hundreds and hundreds of sermons, from grades K-12.

What I remember the most about those sermons was how they ended! No matter how long or short they were, they *all* ended with a closing prayer. I didn’t know it at the time, but the minister was actually quoting a passage of Scripture which was given the name, “benediction.” Over the years, I became well acquainted with three of them:

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen*.*” (2 Corinthians 13:14)

“Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen*.*” (Jude 24-25)

“Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen*.*” (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Since today is Resurrection Sunday, and since we’ve been studying the book of Hebrews, it’s only fitting that we should focus our attention on this third benediction. It’s a text that tells us a great deal about God. For example, our God is a *peace-giving* God (the “God of peace”). Our God is also a *covenant-keeping* God. As we shall see, the blood of the Lord Jesus inaugurated the new and eternal covenant, which was promised in Jeremiah 31 and described in Hebrews 8:8-12. Our God is also an empowering, *soul-equipping* God. He works within our hearts, doing everything necessary to enable us to do His will.

But our God is also a *life-giving* God. We know that because “*he brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep . . . .*” And because all of His children are united to Him by faith, we know that He will eventually bring us back to life after we have died. That’s the hope of eternal glory!

Surprisingly, this is only time the author of Hebrews mentions the resurrection of Jesus. But he has implicitly assumed it, or directly alluded to it, on a number of occasions. In fact, nothing that he has said through the end of chapter four makes any sense at all – unless we take for granted that Jesus was raised from the dead.

So, on this special day of the year, I want us to consider how the resurrection of Christ is woven into everything our author has said thus far, and what that means for us today. There are a number of important passages that should come to mind:

**Exhibit A: Hebrews 1:3** “*The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven*.” If Jesus Christ wasn’t raised from the dead, He hardly could have been exalted by God the Father, and hardly could have sat down at the right hand of God. Nor could He be “sustaining,” or carrying along, “all things” to their appointed goal. The risen Christ organizes, orchestrates, directs, and gives purpose to everything in the universe, and in our lives. We call this *providence*, which rules out chance, fate, and luck.

**Exhibit B: Hebrews 1:5** “*For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father?*’” Here our author is quoting Psalm 2:7, which describes the anointing of a Davidic king and his assent to the throne. But when he applies this to Jesus, the “today” is the day of His resurrection and exaltation, when Jesus was publicly declared to be the Son of God in power, and strength, and authority, and exaltation.

In Acts 13:32-33, Paul also sees this verse (Ps. 2:7) as a prophecy of the bodily resurrection and exaltation of Jesus; “*We tell you the good news: what God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.*’” If Jesus Christ wasn’t raised from the dead, then everything He said and did would never have been validated, for “he was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead . . .” (Rom. 1:4).

**Exhibit C: Hebrews 1:8, 10-12** IfJesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then how could our author say of Him; “*Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever*” (1:8)? And if Jesus is still dead and buried, then how could he say of Him that He “remains” and is ever “the same,” and that His “years will have no end” (1:10-12)?

**Exhibit D: Hebrews 2:9** “*But we see Jesus . . .now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death . . .*” If however, Jesus Christ had not conquered death, we hardly could see Him seated in power at the right hand of the Majesty on high. We could never fix the eyes of our faith on Him, and we could never invest our hope in Him, knowing that our destiny will one day be fulfilled in Him, and because of Him. That’s the hope of eternal glory, which ought to bring genuine joy to our hearts, and not just on Resurrection Sunday!

**Exhibit E: Hebrews 2:18** “*Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*” (2:18). But if Jesus Christ is still dead and buried in a distant grave, then He hardly could come to our aid. In fact, a lifeless corpse cannot come to the aid of anyone at any time.

**Exhibit F: Hebrews 4:14** “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess*.” If Jesus, the Son of God, wasn’t raised from the dead, He hardly could have ascended through the heavens into the heavenly sanctuary. And nothing would make *less* sense than to hold firmly to our confession of faith in Him – if He were still dead and buried. Nor would it make any sense to seek the throne of grace if He were not there, constantly interceding on our behalf (Heb. 4:16).

All of these “exhibits” are by way of review. But there is something else about this benediction that we also must consider. Our author links his reference to the resurrection of Jesus to Jesus’ present ministry: “*May the God of peace . . . who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep . . .*” His point is that the *risen* Savior is a *sheep-shepherding* Savior.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus said “*I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). But He doesn’t cease to be our Shepherd once He has died for us. When He returns, He appears as our Chief Shepherd, as Peter has said: “*And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*” (1 Peter 5:4). But He doesn’t cease to be our Shepherd when He returns for us, for we read in Revelation; “*For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*” (7:17). He continues to shepherd us throughout all eternity.

But until that day arrives, the Risen Christ lives as the great Shepherd of the sheep. Yes, those of us who are elders are called to “shepherd” or “pastor” a local flock. We are called to lead, and feed, and guide, and protect each and every member under our care. However, there are times when we fail and fall short of our pastoral responsibilities as under-shepherds. But the great Shepherd of our souls is always faithful; He will *never* fail us; He will *never* manipulate us, or abuse us, or abandon us to the wolves, or exploit us, or fail to show up when we need Him most.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ *died for* His sheep (John 10:11). As the Chief Shepherd, He *comes for* His sheep (1 Peter 5:4). As the Great Shepherd, He *lives for* His sheep in heaven today (Heb. 13:20). Our Shepherd cares for His own in the past and the present and the future. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). That will *always* be true, because the God of peace brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ.

The highway to heaven is not exactly a leisurely stroll down the yellow brick road. It’s a long, challenging, difficult, and sometimes dangerous journey. There are many obstacles and distractions and temptations that can be found along the way; not to mention the full gallery of imposters within our churches today. But here’s the good news: our risen Savior is our great Shepherd!

So, as we make our way to the heavenly city, all of us should humbly accept His oversight and care. How? By staying close to the Shepherd; by listening to His voice; by seeking His guidance; by trusting in His promises; by heeding the counsel of His faithful under-shepherds; by maintaining fellowship with members of His flock; and by fixing our eyes upon Him rather than on ourselves. If we commit to all of this, we can’t help but rejoice that our life-giving God has brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep! To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!