

A Parting Prayer (Hebrews 13:20–21)

You may have noticed that at the end of every one of our worship services, we end with a benediction. Josh will read a passage from Scripture because we use benedictions that are contained in Scripture. And the word *benediction* means “a good word”—*bene*, meaning “good,” and *diction* from like *dictation* or *diction*, meaning “spoken word” or simply “a word.” So a benediction is a good word. It is a well-wishing of something or the uttering of a good word toward somebody with hopes of benefiting them or blessing them. And every New Testament letter ends with a benediction. All of the Epistles do. Some of them are long. Some of them are short. Some of them are just simple, you know, “Grace and peace be to you,” something like that. Some of them are a bit more lengthy.

And the one that is here in Hebrews 13:20–21, this is one that comes up in that rotation from time to time. And is it the one you have planned for today? He doesn't think so. OK, well, that was a massive opportunity missed because we're not going to be back in the book of Hebrews anytime soon for another series. So this is—verses 20–21 is a passage that comes up in that rotation because it is a benediction, as the author, having requested prayer from them (vv. 18–19 that we looked at last week), he now talks about what it is that he is praying for them in verses 20–21. Some benedictions take the form of a prayer like this one. And by the way, not all benedictions in Scripture are at the end of letters. Some of them are sort of included inside of the text of the letter in the middle or something where the author will sort of break out and begin to pray or speak a good word toward his readers. This one though is a parting benediction. It is one of the longer ones. And this one sums up in a very concise way a number of the themes that we have seen repeated throughout the book of Hebrews as we've been going over that for the last several years. He has requested for them to pray for him (vv. 18–19), and now he prays for them that God would work in them the very things that he has been exhorting them to throughout this entire Epistle.

So having given to them these exhortations—and he has exhorted them a lot. Keep that in mind. And some of the exhortations have been very stern because they have been couched in the form of a warning against apostates or those who would turn from the truth. And a number of the exhortations have been very encouraging, some of them very sobering. But he has pressed them toward what could have been in that culture—not what could have been—what would have been in that culture very costly actions. He has exhorted them to press on into Christ. He has exhorted them to full commitment

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to Jesus Christ and His truth and His Lordship claims upon them. And he has exhorted them to do this without turning back, without cowering away. And he has exhorted them to turn their back on their traditions, their ancient faith, Judaism, the temple, the sacrifices, and even their own family if necessary in order to be part of this new-covenant community that Christ has inaugurated with His own blood. He has encouraged them, commanded them to forsake a hostile world, knowing that this group of people were at this very time suffering for that same confession and for that faith in Christ. They were being persecuted for doing this very thing. And rather than encouraging them, “Look, find a way to sort of solace your critics and those who are persecuting you. Find a way to keep them from being too hostile toward you. Find a way to make the Christian faith palatable to them”—he doesn't exhort any of that. Instead, he says, be prepared to go outside the gate and bear His reproach. They're heaping—the nation and the people, the hostile unbelievers, are heaping scorn upon Christ, so go out to where they are scorning Him, and there gladly bear that reproach and that scorn. He has encouraged them and exhorted them to joyfully and fully embrace the very thing that was the immediate cause of their suffering and their rejection. The immediate trigger for the persecution that they were enduring was their commitment to Christ. And he exhorts them to press into that, to not shy away from it, to not back down, and to not be ashamed of it. Instead, to lean into the very Savior whose name was the cause of their suffering.

Now, that's a tall ask. That's a tall ask. One that in our nation, at least right now, and in our culture, we have not been asked to bear that kind of reproach. We've not been asked to make that kind of commitment. But they were being asked to make that kind of commitment. And the author knows that in a hostile world, their commitment to Christ was going to be costly. It could cost them their possessions; for some of them it already had. Chapter 10: “You . . . accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have . . . a better possession and a lasting one” (v. 34). It could cost them persecution, and some of them had already been imprisoned because he says to them, “Remember the prisoners” (Heb. 13:3). And we know that Timothy—in the closing words of this Epistle, we know that Timothy himself was suffering imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. This could cost them reproach and scorn and ridicule, which they had already endured to a point. And he is telling them that in this hostile world, this commitment to Christ may be costly. And you need to bear up underneath of it and endure the reproach of faith in hopes that you will—with a confident expectation, I

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should say—that you will receive the reward of faith. Endure that reproach so that you will receive that reward.

Now, what hope is there though that any of these readers would actually be able to do that? Because, as I said, that's a tall ask, isn't it? That's serious. How is it, having exhorted them to be pleasing to God in everything, how is it that the readers, and thus by extension us, how is it that we could actually be pleasing to God in everything and do His will and follow all of these exhortations that he has laid out for us in this Epistle? The reality is that we need the power of God at work in us to equip us and to strengthen us to do the very thing that He has commanded us to do. And that is what he prays for in verses 20–21. This is our text for this morning. Read these verses together with me, verses 20–21. Having now asked them to pray for him (vv. 18–19), verse 20:

20 Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord,

21 equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20–21 NASB)

There is a power of God that is described in verse 20—that is, the resurrection. He brought back from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. And so a God who is able to raise the dead can then equip us—that's verse 21—for every good thing to do His will, and He can work in us that which is pleasing in His sight (v. 21). So we have in verse 20 a description of the power of God at work in Christ in raising Him from the dead, and in verse 21, an application of that power is the power of God at work in us to work in us what pleases God and to equip us for every good work. So if you have been burdened by all of the exhortations of the book of Hebrews and you say, “This is a strong list. How is it that I fulfill every good thing and do all that God has called me to do?” I have good news for you. The God who raised His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, from the dead can equip you to do everything that pleases Him, and He actually will work in you to do that which is pleasing in His sight.

So let's begin by looking at the power of God at work in Christ in verse 20, and then we'll look at the power of God at work in us in verse 21. The power of God at work in Christ in verse 20 is a reference to the resurrection. Now the author could have here described the power of God at work in Christ in performing miracles and doing signs and using Him to raise the dead and heal the sick and make the lame to walk, the blind to see, the

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mute to speak, etc. He cast out demons. All of those were signs of the power of God at work in Jesus Christ. He could have described that, but instead I think He gives the greatest demonstration of miraculous, universe-shattering power that could be given, and that is the resurrection of Christ. He says in verse 20: “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep.” Now, he doesn't say, “Now may the God of peace simply work in you and equip you and help you to do the things that I'm commanding you to do.” Instead, he reminds them that the God of peace that they serve—an interesting designation, by the way, that the God of peace that they serve is a God who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep. So if you feel helpless to fulfill any of the exhortations or to obey any of the commands in Scripture, just remember that the God of peace is the one who is at work in you. And oh, by the way, this is a God who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that you ask or even think, like, for instance, raising Christ from the dead three days after He was crucified.

It's interesting that he describes here God as a God of peace. That is a significant description. And a good reminder, this is a Pauline expression. By Pauline, we mean it's an expression that is used by Paul almost exclusively. Typically, when we say it's a Pauline expression, we mean it's used almost exclusively by an author. Outside of this reference to God as a God of peace, it is only Paul who describes God as a God of peace. This is a Pauline expression. I think it's used six other times in the New Testament, all of them by the apostle Paul, which by the way, is one of the reasons why people say that they think that Paul wrote this book. Just because somebody borrows somebody else's language doesn't mean that they wrote the book. And so I still hold to this not being written by the apostle Paul, but one of the reasons people give for thinking Paul wrote this is expressions like this in the book. I would argue that it at least shows a familiarity with the apostle Paul, probably a close kinship of sorts that he would adopt Paul's designation of God as a God of peace. The fact that the author knew Timothy, whom he mentions in verse 23, I think is an evidence that he is within the circle of Paul and Timothy and probably Titus and Epaphroditus and that close group of people who traveled with the apostle Paul. So I think the author uses a Pauline expression here to remind his readers who were going through hostility and persecution and suffering and affliction and even discipline at the hand of God, he is reminding them that there is a source of peace that transcends all of those trials and afflictions, and that is God, who Himself is a God of peace. He is a God who is the source of peace.

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And we would say this in two respects. God is a source of peace in two ways. First, that He is the one who initiates peace with us so that we can have peace with God, and then He is the one who grants peace to us so that we can have the peace of God. There's two kinds of peace. There's peace with God and the peace of God. We first need peace with God before we can have the peace of God. Peace with God comes first. And if you have peace with God, it is only because God Himself has done something to broker that peace with you and to make Him at peace with you. This, by the way, is a fundamental problem with us as human beings. We have no peace with God. We come into this world and we are rebels. We are at war with God. We are hostile to Him in our minds through wicked works, and all of our sins deserve His wrath. And we hang under the sword of His wrath every moment of our days until we come to Christ and have peace with God through the death of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And once we have the peace with God, we are no longer hostile to Him, and He is no longer hostile toward us, but instead He is satisfied with our sin because it has been paid for and atoned for in the sacrifice of His Son. Once we have that peace, then we find from God peace that comes to us in the midst of all of the kinds of circumstances that have been described in this Epistle that we know that these readers were enduring.

Paul describes the peace we have with God in Romans 5:1: "Having been justified [that is, declared righteous by God] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." And the one who is not in Christ but instead remains in their sin, the warnings in Hebrews are for people like that who do not yet have peace with God. You cannot have the peace of God in life circumstances until you have first the peace that comes from God, that is with God, and the cessation of hostilities. And that only comes through the blood of the eternal covenant.

This God, this God of peace has brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep. Notice the reference there to being brought up from the dead. That is a reference to the resurrection of Christ. Now, I ask you this, would it surprise you to find out that this is the very first explicit mention of the resurrection of Christ in this Epistle, all the way at the very end? You would think that that's something that might have been mentioned at the very beginning of the Epistle, but it's not. It's not explicitly mentioned until here at the end. It doesn't mean that the resurrection of Christ didn't happen. It doesn't mean that it's an insignificant event. It doesn't mean that the author didn't know much about it. But I would suggest to you that even though it is only mentioned here explicitly in verse 20 for the first time in this Epistle, that everything else in the book of Hebrews concerning the Lord Jesus Christ rests upon this great truth in verse 20.

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So it's entirely appropriate for the author to mention explicitly here now the resurrection of Christ. Everything else that he has said about Christ and our hope in Him has been built upon the foundation of this assumed truth, the resurrection of the great Shepherd of the sheep. For instance—you can turn to these passages if you want, but I'm going to be rattling them off rather quickly—in Hebrews 5:7, the author says, “In the days of His flesh [that is, Christ], He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.” How was Jesus heard when He offered up prayers to the One able to save Him from death? The Father didn't save Him from physical death, did He? But the Father did what? Raised Him from the dead three days later and thus delivered Him from eternal death. So even that passage assumes the resurrection of Christ.

Hebrews 6:20 says, “Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” And by the way, His functioning as a high priest and interceding for us and this eternal priesthood that He has is all because of the resurrection. So the author says in Hebrews 7:3 that Melchizedek was “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.” That is an allusion to Christ, who Himself is without beginning and without end and has no end of His days and continually, perpetually lives on in this eternal priesthood.

Chapter 7, verse 8: “In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on.” That's referring to Christ.

Hebrews 7:16: “Who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life.” That's Christ. An indestructible life.

Do you see how His intercession, the fact that He is seated at the Father's right hand, the fact that He lives on, that He inhabits His priesthood forever, that He is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, that He is willing and able to save any and all who come to Him and to preserve them everlastingly until eternal glory, all of that rests upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, without the resurrection, you and I have none of those things. None of them. Christ is greater than all else because He is the incarnate God who suffered and then rose again. And if He is not risen, then there is no exhortation in the book of Hebrews that means anything. And if He is not risen, then there is no encouragement in the book of Hebrews that has any substance to it whatsoever. There is no command that is worth obeying. There is nothing in this book that is worth anything if Christ has not risen from the dead physically three days after

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He suffered and died. The entire Christian faith rests on the resurrection, and our hope of eternal life and our hope of eternal reward rests on the resurrection of Christ. We can have no expectation of a kingdom. We can have no expectation of a lasting city, of an eternal land, of the promise of eternal life. In fact, I would suggest to you that if Christ has not risen from the dead, why would you go outside the gate and bear His reproach? Even that command means nothing. Even that command is folly. Why should I bear the shame and the hostility and the reproach for a dead man? It is only if He has risen that going outside the gate and bearing His reproach with hope of and expectation of eternal reward, eternal life, and eternal joy makes any sense at all. All of it rests upon the resurrection of Christ.

And if the Father does not have the power to raise Christ from the dead, then He certainly does not have the power to raise me from the dead because I am not a righteous man in myself. And if the Father does not raise Christ from the dead, the Father will not raise us from the dead, and that means that death will have the final word. Therefore, all of the encouragement, the exhortation, the strength, the positive truth, the hope of eternal life, the hope of eternal reward, even faith itself, rests upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But notice in the passage (v. 20) that that resurrection is tied in some measure to the blood of the eternal covenant. It says He “brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant.” What does it mean that He was raised through the blood of the eternal covenant? In some measure, in some fashion, the blood of Christ is attached to the resurrection that He experienced. What did that blood secure? Even in our own context, chapter 13, verse 12, it says that Christ, “that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate.” There is, in the blood of Christ and in what it secures, there is the promise of eternal resurrection.

Now let me tie the blood of Christ and the resurrection of Christ together in this way. The resurrection of Christ was the Father's testimony, the Father's declaration, that the sacrifice of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the blood He shed was sufficient to pay the sin debt for any and all who will believe and that the righteousness of His Son was fully accepted and that His sacrifice was indeed finished and sufficient to save all. Because the Son suffered what He did and accomplished on the cross what He did, the Father has stamped His approval on that sacrifice by raising Him from the dead. It is the Father's declaration that this sacrifice is sufficient. No more animal sacrifices, no more

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temple ceremonies, no more feasts, no more festivals, no more dietary laws, none of the pomp and circumstance of that Old Testament system, which was only able to give a reminder of sin day after day, week after week, year after year until One came along who offered one sacrifice once for all, who has put an end to all other sacrifices.

This is why the warning passages of Hebrews mean so much. If you reject that sacrifice, there remains for you no other sacrifice. Because the death of Christ did not just make salvation possible or probable or available; the death of Christ, listen, has secured forever the eternal joy, salvation, and righteousness of all who trust Him. So that all who come to Him by faith He will receive because He will save them, give them eternal life, keep them, and raise them up on the last day. And the Son's promise is, "I will lose none. Every last one that the Father has given to Me will come. I will embrace all of them. I will turn none of them away, and I will raise them all up on the last day." That's the claim of this great Shepherd of the sheep. Reject it at your own peril, embrace it for your eternal joy. That is the stakes of what is before us. So, He brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep, who died for His sheep. And that was the Father's way of saying, "Sacrifice accepted, atonement secured, the work is done." And the Father glorified Him by raising Him again and seating Him at His right hand, where He waits till His enemies be made a footstool for His feet, and then He will return again. Christ has satisfied the wrath of God through that death, purchasing the redemption of His people and securing their eternal joy. And the Father was pleased with that sacrifice and raised the great Shepherd of the sheep from the dead. That is how the blood of Christ and the resurrection of Christ are attached.

He brought back the great Shepherd of the sheep through [that is, because of and by] the blood of the eternal covenant. It is an eternal covenant because it is a covenant which can never be set aside, it can never be annulled, it'll never be improved, it can never be changed. And that eternal covenant was secured by the blood, the eternal blood, of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has purchased eternal salvation and eternal inheritance and eternal life for all who are His. And therefore, it is the blood which has inaugurated or initiated the new covenant, which is in fact an eternal covenant. And you and I, a million years from now, will rejoice as much in the blood of that covenant and the joy of that and the sacrifice of that as we do even here today.

The reference to Christ being the great Shepherd of the sheep is a—that is a common Hebrew imagery for the Messiah and even for Yahweh, for God, for their God, their covenant God. That I think is why he refers to Christ as the great Shepherd of the sheep,

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a very Jewish or Hebrew allusion or explanation, description, title, as it were, for Christ. You see it in the Old Testament in a number of places. I'll give you a few and show you how it is that the Lord Jesus Christ uses that title of Himself.

Ezekiel 34:23, there is the promise, "I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd." Now that's not—that is a reference both to David, literally David in the resurrection, but also to the greater son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, a descendant of David. And that is a promise attached to the new covenant and to the Messiah Himself. They would refer to the Messiah as the son of David. One coming from David's line would come to shepherd His sheep. And Ezekiel refers to Him as David, My [God's] servant.

Isaiah 40:11: "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes." That is a reference to the Messiah in Isaiah 40.

Psalms 23:1, you're familiar with that. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." If you asked any Jew in the first century, who is Israel's great Shepherd? They would have said, "Yahweh is our great Shepherd." The Lord is my shepherd.

And then on to the scene steps One, a son of Joseph, who says, "I'm the good Shepherd, and I give My life for the sheep." What was He claiming? He was claiming to be Yahweh. He was claiming to be Israel's God. That's why they picked up stones to stone Him in chapter 10. That's why they picked up stones to stone Him in chapter 5 of the gospel of John. Because He was claiming to be Israel's shepherd. They understood exactly what it meant. It was a claim to deity. Sometimes people get all hung up and upset. They say Jesus never claimed to be God. No, He did, but He didn't come out and say, "I am God." Instead, He came out and said things like, "I'm the good shepherd. I'm the light of the world." He used titles like that and images like that to communicate who He was. So we see first of all here, the power of God at work in Christ, raising Him from the dead.

Second, I want you to notice the power of God at work in us. Verse 21: May this God "equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." He is desiring here for his audience, for his readers, that the God who brought back Christ from the dead would Himself equip them in every good thing and work in them that which pleased Him. The need that they had to be equipped and to be energized or strengthened for every good work is the same need that you and I have. The author has

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called them to remain steadfast and immovable, to endure hostility, rejection, scorn, reproach, and persecution, and we are called to do the same thing, to not go back to our former way of life but instead to endure affliction and difficulty, to remain faithful to Christ and to pay and bear any cross that such commitment and faithfulness demands. And if we turn away, there is the threatenings of the warning passages like the one in chapter 10, verses 26–27 that says, “If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”

We are called to embrace lovingly the discipline that comes from God, knowing that it is sent from a loving Father and that every affliction and every trial and every difficulty and every amount of suffering is intended by Him to discipline us and conform us to the image of Christ and mold us and shape us into Christ's image so that we will bear the fruit of godliness. And we are called then to look to Jesus, who endured the cross and despised the shame, to not wilt, to not look back, to not turn back, to not go back, and to instead live as kingdom citizens, those who have received a kingdom, and look forward to an eternal inheritance and an eternal city. We are called to love the brethren, love the stranger, love the prisoner, honor your marriage and your moral purity, do good and share, continually praise God and sacrifice, with which such things God is well-pleased.

Now that's a summary of the exhortations in the book of Hebrews. That is by no means an exhaustive list of the things that he has commanded and encouraged us to in this book. He has provided for us in this book warnings and positive teachings, positive examples and negative examples, promises and pledges and reminders of God's grace. He has given us illustrations in Old Testament texts, even a long list of historic examples of enduring faith in Hebrews 11. And yet reading through this entire book and now coming to the end, you and I, with all of those examples and all of those encouragements and all of those exhortations, we would have to confess that we feel constitutionally unable to do any of these things. The power to do this does not reside in us. I long to obey, I desire to obey, but I can't. I can't obey. I can strive for it, but I can't do this. All of this seems so daunting, and we realize that we are weak and frail and we are vacillating creatures. We can renew our resolve at the beginning of every year, at the beginning of every week, at the end of every communion service, and yet constitutionally we have to confess that we feel at the very center of our being a weakness that we wish we could overcome. How do you do it?

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We need a God who raised a dead Man from the grave to equip us and then to work in us the very things that He commands us to do. Well, I have good news for you. That's exactly what verses 20–21 are all about. Now, may this God who did this, demonstrated His power by raising the great Shepherd of the sheep, may He equip you and work in you. The word *equip* there means to put in order, to mend, restore, to prepare for something. It describes making something ready or adequate. He's asking God to prepare and equip and make them adequate for this task of what he has encouraged and exhorted them to in this Epistle.

Working in us—the definition of this word *working*, it's not the same word as—let me try that again. I sound like I'm running for president. It's not the same word from which we get our word *energy*, which is a Greek word that is often translated as “work.” Instead, this work has a semantic range that is so wide and so big it is almost difficult to pin down. It means to cause, to make, to be, to work, to perform, establish, create, build, execute, make. It's used over five hundred times in the New Testament, and it is translated almost five hundred different ways in the New Testament. It is a broad semantic range, but the idea of it is that God Himself would work in them to perform in them the very thing that He has been commanding them to do. So while exhorting them to do this thing, don't turn back, understand that you must have one more powerful than you, whose power is beyond our comprehension, demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ, who actually does that work in you. Because if we just sit back and say, “OK, Lord, do the work,” it'll never happen. But instead, in the striving, we experience this grace and this strength. We need God to do in us what is pleasing to Him. We are dependent upon Him to work in us a walk that is worthy of the great calling with which we have been called. We are commanded to do what pleases God, and yet we are unable to do that apart from His grace.

Paul described this in Philippians 2:12–13. These are two verses that if you've never memorized them, you should. Philippians 2:12: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence [listen to this command], work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” That is a daunting command. Next verse, verse 13: “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” And so as believers in Christ, we don't sit back and say, “All right, Lord, do it. Make me holy. Any time now would be good. Make me holy. Make me obedient. Make me strong for this,” and then wait for it to happen. That is not how it happens. Instead, we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who is at work in us, both to will—the desire to do that comes from Him, and

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the energy or the ability to do it comes from Him—to will and to work for His good pleasure.

So we are commanded to do the things that please God, but we cannot do them. But we are strengthened to do the things that please God because God is at work in us. This is why the author here in Hebrews 12 says, “Pursue peace with all men, and [pursue] the sanctification [holiness] without which no one will see the Lord” (v. 14). Chase after holiness, knowing that you can no more make yourself holy than you can create a solar system out of nothing. You cannot do that. I cannot make myself holy. I have no ability to do that, but I can obey this command to pursue holiness, trusting that God is the one who has given me the desire to pursue that as well as the strength to do so.

This is behind the command of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3, which we read earlier. Listen to this prayer again, Ephesians 3:14:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,

15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,

16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, [listen] to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,

17 [Paul says, “I pray that you would be strengthened”] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14–19 NASB)

So here's the command or the prayer: I ask you that you be strengthened in the inner man, that you may know the love of God, that you may be filled with all the knowledge of God, that you may be filled with the Spirit of God, filled with the power of God. Here's the description of that power: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (vv. 20–21).

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He prays for them to be strengthened, he reminds them of the power of a God who strengthens them, then the command in the very next word: “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). Now if Paul had started that section with that command, it would have been daunting. Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called? What kind of calling have we been called with? That's Ephesians 1–3. You've been chosen in Christ and adopted and redeemed, and He shed His blood for you, and you've been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and you have been made one in the body of Christ (that's Eph. 2), so there's no distinction between Jew and Gentile, and instead you have been brought into this mystery, which in the Old Testament was hidden but now has been revealed in Christ, and you are part now of the body of Christ, having been granted eternal blessings that were made yours before the world was and before anything was spoken into existence. This grace was granted to you; now walk in a manner worthy of that calling. That's a high calling which requires a high walk. And if the apostle had started with just simply, “Now walk in a way that comports with this grand calling that you have been given, all this grace that you have been shown,” we would say, “I don't have the ability to do that. I can't do that.” So instead the apostle Paul says, “Listen, I'm praying that you would be strengthened in the inner man. Remember that the power of God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or even think. Now, in that power and by that strength, you walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.”

So how do I put to death my sin? How do I walk in holiness? How do I obey the commands of Scripture? If it's just up to Jim Osman to do that in his flesh, we're all—we are sunk. I say the same thing about you because I know you. You're somebody who has the same nature as I do. But if God is at work in us, both to will and to do for His good pleasure, then every exhortation in this Epistle suddenly takes on a new meaning. I can do this because God grants us the grace to do this.

As I close, I want to give you two applications from this passage and these principles. First, I would encourage you that this is something that we can pray for. Pray for ourselves, pray for others, pray for your leaders, pray for your family, your kids, your grandkids. We want God to do in them the very thing that He commands them to do. We want God to strengthen them, to equip them, to carry out His will, and to glorify Him. We're asking God to make others fit for His work and for His service and then to strengthen them for that service.

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The second application is this is a motivation to us to obedience. You see, if we don't strive to do His will and to work that which is pleasing in His sight, then we won't. And if He doesn't strengthen us for it, we can't. So if I don't do it, it won't get done. But it is in the doing—and if He doesn't strengthen me in it, then I can't do it. But listen, it is by faith that we do the work and we obey and we strive, and it is by faith that we are obeying because, in the striving, we experience the grace that He gives to those who strive to obey the commands. So if we sit back and say, “Lord, strengthen me to do this thing,” and then we put no effort into the striving, if we just sit back and soak it in and say, “Lord, make me holy, make me obedient,” but we never actually do that, then we never experience the grace or the strength that makes us both holy and obedient. It is a cooperative effort with the Lord, not in the sense that I bring strength and power to the table but in the sense that I bring obedience to the table and He brings the strength to obey to the table. So if I don't do it, it won't get done, and if He doesn't strengthen me for it, then I can't do it, but in the doing of it, He strengthens us so that we do it.

If you're thinking to yourself that is a mystery, I'd say you're right, that is an absolute mystery. I don't know how that works out exactly other than to say that it is in the striving that we experience the grace to do the doing. And by faith, we step out in obedience and say, “I will do this because God commands me to do it, and when we do that, we find out that He is at work in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure. So we're not pietists who sit back and wait for something supernatural to happen to the outside. And we're not legalists or fleshly oriented Christians who think that all of the effort and the striving is ours. Instead, we say, “Lord, I will do this, but I need You to strengthen me to do this, to equip me for it, and to work in me that which is pleasing in Your sight. Give me the strength to obey, give me the will to obey, give me the work to obey so that I may obey You and please You and do what is pleasing in His sight.”

And so therefore, when we do His will, we please God, but we can't take glory for it because we have—what have we contributed to it? Really nothing. Now you might say, “But, Jim, we contributed the willing. I was willing to obey, right?” No, both the willing and the working is God working in you. The fact that I desire to be obedient is the work of God in me. It begins there. If it were not for God's grace in that way, we would have no desire to be obedient in the least, in the least of the commands. And so we do this and we give Him glory because to Him belongs the glory both now and forever in the church and among all His creation. And we'd have to say, “Amen.”

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