

Resources for Life”
Hebrews 13:7-14
October 31, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Life had been hard for the recipients of this letter, due chiefly to their decision to follow Christ. As a consequence, many were in danger of falling away from Christ completely. The author has been reminding them throughout that Jesus is sufficient for all their needs. As he draws near the end of the book, he repeats his main point by way of a concluding statement. In this conclusion, he reminds them of the abundant resources they have, all of which center on Jesus.

We also know about hard times. Many of us have experienced significant losses over the past year or so. Some have lost loved ones, while others have lost jobs or good health. We have all lost, at least for a time, the joys of freely assembling together indoors. We too need to remember that there are abundant resources available to us in Christ. The author has been talking about these resources for the entire book because the readers of the book, like us, often don't take advantage of all that we have in Christ.

We are often like the story of the old lumberjack who used all hand tools in his trade. One day a chainsaw salesman came to him and promised him ten times the efficiency with this new tool. He invited the lumberjack to try it out for a day, but the lumberjack reported after that day that he could do more with his old tools than with this new one. The salesman thought that maybe he just needed to get used to it, so he invited him to try it out a second day. But the lumberjack reported back after the second day that it had gone more poorly than the first. On the third day the salesman said, "Well, let me go with you and see what the problem might be." As they got to the first tree to be felled, the salesman started up the chainsaw. The old lumberjack, looking frightened, said, "What's that noise?" We have abundant resources available to us in Christ, but often don't use them. We are going to consider three of those resources today and three more in our final sermon on this book.

I. Dead Leaders – v. 7-8

The leaders mentioned in these two verses, unlike the ones mentioned later in verses 17 and 24, are no longer with them. They are the founding pastors of the church **“who spoke to you the word of God.”** They are to remember these leaders and **“consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”** Notice that it is their *faith* they are to imitate. The author is zeroing in on the source of power for these former leaders who have now passed away. It

was their faith in the Lord. Their strength was not in themselves but in the Lord. They are encouraged to imitate the faith of these leaders, not their style or their mannerisms or their dress. They had lived with these leaders and had known them well. They probably even knew of their sins. What they were to imitate was their faith, because it was their faith that was at the heart of their strength.

They were told to consider the outcome of the way of life of these leaders. The assumption is that these leaders had endured some suffering. Perhaps some of them were even martyred for their faith. But they had continued to trust the Lord during these times, and the author wants his readers to do the same. When he tells them to consider the outcome of their way of life, he is asking them to take the long view rather than the snapshot view of their lives. A snapshot view of a person's life will often reveal significant suffering. But if you consider the whole of a person's life, you get a better and truer picture of the person. Someone has said, "Only when a tree has fallen can you take the measure of it. It is the same with a man." These leaders, now gone, had suffered and stayed true to the Lord.

Life coaches will sometimes ask people what they want written on their tombstones. I can think of nothing better than what this verse suggests: "A man of faith." This is the legacy I want to leave to my children and grandchildren.

This verse teaches us something about spiritual formation. It teaches the power of faithful men and women to help shape and strengthen the faith of others. Can you think of people who have done that for you? I think of my father, who was a faithful and loyal man. I want to imitate his faith. I think of one of my mentors, Jack Miller, who suffered from a variety of serious health challenges the last fifteen years of his life but remained zealous in his service to the Lord. I think of a member of this church, now deceased, who faithfully served his wife for ten years after her stroke. In every case, those I admire and want to follow suffered and remained faithful to the Lord.

Before moving off this verse, I want to ask you the question of what or who is shaping your spiritual life? Is it shaped by social media, news channels, and popular media? Or is it shaped by godly men and women who have remained faithful through the trials of life?

The next verse supplies us with the key ingredient of the faith of those who are to be imitated. **"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."** This verse is often lifted from its context to make some theological point about the nature of Christ. In its context, though, it is about the object of our faith, Jesus. This verse ought to give us an abundance of optimism about life in this fallen world. The same Jesus who was with our former leaders in days past will be with us today. And in the future he will be with our children

as well. As we think about the future for our children and grandchildren, it is an easy thing to give way to fear. The truth of this verse is sufficient to calm all fear.

II. The Power of the Cross – v. 9-12

It's a little difficult to follow the author's reasoning in this next section. His basic point is the one stated in the middle of verse 9: **“It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods.”** Prior to that, he had warned them not to be **“led away by diverse and strange teachings.”** It is likely that one of these false teachings was the idea that the eating of certain foods is able to strengthen us spiritually. Given the Jewish background to this book, he is probably referring to foods that had been offered sacrificially to God, such as in the Passover celebration. He calls these teachings “diverse” and “strange.” The word for “diverse” is used in the Septuagint for Joseph's multi-colored coat. False teaching is often dazzling to behold but offers little of substance. He also refers to these false teachings as “strange.” It's the same word used for a stranger or foreigner, so the idea here is something novel. False teaching is often both dazzling and novel, but it proves to be like eye candy in that it offers nothing of substance and in the end proves to be deadly.

What are some modern versions of these strange and diverse teachings? I have come across several of these during my time as a pastor. There are Christians who think we would be helped by reverting to the Old Testament dietary laws. I have read of leaders who have said that the key to spiritual strength is in proper habits of fasting from food. Others have claimed that such strength lies in taking communion in the right way and with sufficient frequency. Still others locate that strength in observing certain rules for life, such as limiting time on social media. There may be nothing wrong with any of those, and at times they may be advisable. But they are not the source of strength for the Christian. That source lies in the grace of God through Jesus. As the author says, we are **“to be strengthened by grace.”**

Our need, and the source of our strength, is in knowing and believing that the heart of God is for us with great passion and energy. The heart of God pines for his lost, wandering children. I find in the parable of the prodigal son the most moving illustration of the father's heart. It says that the father saw his lost son when he was still a long way off. That means that the father was looking for him every day. And it means that every day prior to the son's arrival, the heart of the father was broken anew.

Our author stays with the theme of food and points out that we get strengthened by God's grace through feeding on Jesus. It's likely that Christians were criticized by their Jewish relatives as not even having an altar. He makes the point, though, that Christians do have an altar that non-

Christians do not have. The background of verses 10-12 is the annual Day of Atonement that has been featured so prominently in this book. As verse 11 points out, when the bull and the goat were sacrificed on the Day of Atonement, the blood was taken by the high priest into the holy of holies. The bodies of the animals, on the other hand, were taken outside the camp to be burned. This was different than many of the other sacrifices in that the priests were often allowed to eat the meat of those sacrifices. But that was not the case with the animals on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, and the author's point is that Christians do get to feed on this sacrifice. We do so by faith, as Jesus indicated in John 6:53-55.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” He's talking about feeding on Jesus by faith. Faith is like a hungry, thirsty person finding great satisfaction through eating and drinking. The rebellious heart wants to go elsewhere for such satisfaction, while the heart of faith goes to Jesus.

Verse 12 is another verse requiring a knowledge of Old Testament practices if it is to be understood. It says that like the sacrificial animal on the Day of Atonement, **“Jesus also suffered outside the gate.”** But unlike that animal, the sufferings of Jesus were able **“to sanctify the people through his own blood.”** Israel's wilderness camp consisted of the tents of the twelve tribes with God's tent, the tabernacle, in the middle. It was considered holy ground because of the presence of the tabernacle. “Outside the gate” refers to those places outside this camp, meaning that they are not holy. Jerusalem was the same, with the places outside the gates of Jerusalem considered unholy. Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, was in this unholy place outside the gate. But instead of Jesus becoming unholy by his presence there, that is the place where he makes us holy, or sanctified. This was true not only in the death of Jesus, but throughout his life as well. According to the Old Testament laws of cleanness and uncleanness, Jesus should have been made unclean by touching lepers or dead people. But instead, they were made clean. Lepers were healed and the dead were raised. Jesus should have been made unclean by his crucifixion in an unclean place. Instead, he has made his people clean forever. This is our daily bread, our sustenance and our life. This is the food to which we go for strength, the food of God's grace toward undeserving but loved sinners like us.

III. Bearing Reproach – v. 13-14

If you want to be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you have to go where Jesus is. As verse 13 says, he is **“outside the camp,”** which is the place of reproach. It's the wrong side of the tracks, the unclean place, the bad part of town. But that's where Jesus is found. What does this mean? It

means that the times when we are closest to God are usually the times when everything seems to be falling apart. It is in times of humility, weakness, and suffering that we are usually most open to encounter God in life-giving ways. This means that pride is our greatest hindrance to finding strength in the Lord. It means that we are most dangerous when we are clinging to power at all costs. It means we are most wrong when we are so completely sure that we are right. It means that the way up is to go down. It means that Augustus Toplady was right when he wrote the famous words to his hymn. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

Let's apply this by asking, "What is the circumstance you would most like to see changed in your life?" Perhaps it's something about your marriage, your job, or your body. Maybe it's feeling trapped by something right now. For me, it's the many challenges that the past 20 months have brought to our church. The promise of this passage is that whatever you just named is the place outside the camp where you will meet Jesus. Your biggest challenge is also your greatest opportunity to be strengthened by Jesus. There are times when losing is the best thing that can happen to us because it takes us to Jesus. Don't forget that Jesus lost at the cross, but in losing he won everything. By God's grace, the Christian can lose every battle and win the war.

Verse 14 promises that those who go outside the city gates to be with Jesus gain a lasting city. As the martyred missionary Jim Eliot famously said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." So the gates are now open to come to Christ by faith. The day will come when those gates will be closed, and God's judgment will be visited upon the city of man. The only place of refuge then will be with Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

We have the privilege this morning of feeding on Jesus' word and on his table. Both point us to the grace of God in Christ, and both offer that grace to us. We receive this grace not by the mere act of eating and drinking, but by eating and drinking in faith. In faith, we renew both our acknowledgment of neediness as sinners, and our acknowledgement of forgiveness and sufficiency in Jesus. May you be strengthened today through the word of Jesus and the sacrament about Jesus!

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 13:7-14

1. Verse 7 invites us to remember previous Christian leaders who have had an impact on our lives and to imitate their faith. Who are some leaders who have had an impact on your life?
2. These leaders are to play a critical role in our spiritual formation. What are some competing and detrimental forces seeking to impact our spiritual formation? For example, spending too many hours on social media or listening to cable news networks comes to mind. Can you think of other examples.
3. Verse 8 is a verse that should bring us great optimism. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” What is so optimistic and encouraging about this verse?
4. Verse 9 says that it is good to be strengthened by grace. What is it about God’s grace that gives you strength?
5. Verse 9 also says that there are things we look to for strength, such as food in this case, that don’t bring strength at all. What are some of those things we look to that fail to deliver the hoped-for strength?
6. We are invited to go to Jesus “outside the camp,” meaning in the place of challenge and reproach. We find Jesus in the difficult places of life. Has that been your experience? Explain.
7. Why has God made things so that we find Jesus in the lowly places (outside the camp) instead of in the high places of power and prestige?
8. Verse 14 is well-summed up by the famous quote from the martyred missionary Jim Eliot. “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.” What difference does that verse, as reflected in the Eliot quote, make in your life?