

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS – PART THIRTEEN

It all sounds very exciting to live by faith, running the race of life with the heroes of the Old Testament, as the unseen crowd, cheering us on. We are to look continually to Jesus as the One who starts us off in the race when we first meet Him at the cross, who runs the race within us as our strength in every sense, and who is waiting to welcome us into heaven at the finishing line. He is our Trainer and our Father, first having given us a superb example when He ran the perfect race on earth and then disciplining us, not with a whip but with His word. All this is so much better than the Old Testament message which depended on outward forms, the high priest, the Law, the tabernacle and the sacrifices. The final chapter of this extraordinary book answers the one remaining question - what will the life of faith look like in the real world?

The first evidence that we are enjoying the love of God, our Father, is that we show love for the family, our brothers in Christ. As John put it 'If someone says "I love God" and hates his brother, he is a liar.' (I Jn.4:20) Some brothers are harder to love than others. They become the real test of our claim to love the Lord. We cannot do it but He in us can and will.(13:1)

Even harder than loving our fellow believers is to love the stranger who walks in the door looking for food and a bed for the night. In the modern world most of us are experts at keeping unwanted visitors out of our homes with the excuses of safety and economy. The Middle East of the first century had a strong cultural obligation to provide hospitality to the unexpected visitor even when they could not afford it. The friend, in Luke 11, whose friend turned up at midnight though there was no food, would be a common occurrence. Once a stranger had been invited in to share their table, there was a lasting bond which would be unfamiliar to most of us. Revelation 3:20 described the intimacy which resulted when Jesus was welcomed into their lives like a dinner guest. The writer of Hebrews was recalling the occasion in Genesis 18 when Jesus and 2 angels were entertained by Abraham and Sarah unaware of their identity. In a similar way Jesus reminded His disciples in Matt.25:35 that feeding the hungry visitor could mean they were feeding Him.(13:2)

The prisoner whom the writer of this book had in mind would probably be in jail for his faith and unable to turn up at our front door.(Matt.25:36) The life of faith will lead us to some unlikely people and places without regard for our safety or our public reputation. To us the criminal, the outcast, the drop-out, and the poor will be Jesus in an unlikely disguise.(13:3)

Opening our homes to difficult guests requires that we have a strong marriage in which we are absolutely committed to faithfulness to the one whom God has given us. Remember how Jesus pointed out that adultery in our minds was still adultery as far as God was concerned.(Matt.5:27,28) Our present day Western view of sexual 'freedom' has no place in the life of faith.(13:4)

The life of faith will also set us free from the materialism which dominates our world into a contentment with what we have. The Lord's promise never to desert, fail or forsake us was first made to Moses as he encouraged the people of Israel before they began the adventure of possessing the land of Canaan.(Deut.31:6,8; Josh.1:5) He promises to meet every need we have,(Phil.4:19) so why panic and try to do it ourselves?(13:5,6)

Having spent much time in this book weaning spiritual babies away from depending on earthly high priests or others to feed them, the writer now encouraged us in a healthy sense to value those who taught us. While not judging them in criticism we are to look realistically at the outcome of

their faith before imitating, not their behaviour, but their trust in Christ. In particular we are to look carefully at their teaching to be sure they have not side-tracked from the unchanging truth of Jesus Christ. Like the noble-minded Bereans we are to check all we hear with the Bible.(Acts 17:11; I Cor.14:29) Is their teaching centred on grace or have they wandered into rules about food for example? Are they putting emphasis on a special building, furnishings or rituals and so re-creating another tabernacle? Jesus' sacrifice of Himself on the cross did not happen in the temple in Jerusalem but on a hillside outside the city. It is out in a rough, tough world where the life of faith is run. The sacrifice God wants is not in a sacred ceremony but a simple one of thanksgiving to Him and care of the needy.(Rom.12:1; Matt.9:13) We are to obey our leaders. Does this mean we are to do everything they say like Jim Jones, the pastor who ordered nearly a thousand of his followers to drink poison in the jungles of Guyana some 30 years ago? The word used here for 'obey' is not the usual one chosen to describe doing what God says. It means 'to be persuaded'. If our leaders are disciplining us with the word, which centres on the grace of God in Christ, and not side-tracking then we are to be persuaded by them. There follows a solemn warning to those leaders about the immense responsibility they carry to be faithful themselves. At the same time as leaders we are to enjoy our task.(13:7-17)

Though unnamed in this letter, the writer was obviously known to the recipients. He gave news of Timothy who had been in prison but was now free. He hoped to visit them soon, if possible with Timothy. He appeared to be writing from Italy, presumably from Rome. All this raises again the possibility that the letter was written by Paul because this is so much his style. Also pointing in the same direction is his request that they pray for him.(Eph.6:19; Col.4:3; I Thess.5:25) Why did the writer want them to pray for him having already witnessed that his conscience was clear, which once more sounds like Paul?(Acts 23:1; 24:16) What were they to ask God to do? Presumably the real impact of their prayer would be in their own hearts. Their hearing of God had become dull.(5:11) Listening to God in prayer would sharpen it up again to take in the urgent and powerful message of this letter. It is refreshing to meet someone who is driven not by the urge to impress others but by his own inner compulsion to be all that God wants us to be.

The letter closes as Paul's letters always do with a benediction, a prayer for God's best in the lives of his readers.(Rom.15:33; 16:24-27; I Cor.16:23; II Cor.13:14; Gal.6:18; Eph.6:23,24; Phil.4:23; Co.4:18; I Thess.5:28; II Thess.3:18; I Tim.6:21; II Tim.4:22; Tit.3:15; Philem.25) This time his special thought is that the better High Priest, by the better sacrifice, on the basis of the better covenant, will by means of His resurrection life live in them and work through them. His final words sum the book up in one word, grace.(13:18-25)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What five characteristics of the life of faith in the 'better message' does the writer describe here? How did the heroes of the Old Testament get these issues wrong sometimes and right at others? Why are these particular features so important for us today?(verses 1-6)
2. How are we to regard our leaders and teachers? In what ways are we to follow them? How should we respond if their teaching is off track? Why is there a reminder here that Jesus was crucified outside the city? How does this relate to false teaching? What sacrifice does God want from us? Should we obey every command of our leaders? Should leaders be fearful or joyful?(verses 7-17)
3. Why does the writer want his readers to pray for him? What are his hopes and plans? Did Paul write this letter? How does he sum up his message in his final farewell?(verses 18-25)