

The Great Benediction

~ Hebrews 13:2-25

Riley Newton
August 15, 2021

When I was in Grade 7, not that long ago, I remember my father having a conversation with me about school. As many of you know, here in Alberta, elementary and junior high split right between Grade 6 and 7, and there is a very big difference between those two grades, even more so than in between junior high and high school I would contend. My dad wanted me to start taking school seriously.

In Grade 6, we had what was called the Provincial Achievement Test or PAT. It was the first time that I had experienced a “final exam” that directly affected my overall grade for the year. I took it somewhat seriously, studied a little bit, and did fairly well.

My father’s tale to me was that I needed to start learning to study hard for exams, because they were about to become part of my regular life in Grade 7. He told me about his difficulties with test anxiety, and how it greatly affected his learning in those formative years of schooling. His fear was obviously the very same for me; that I too would have severe test anxiety and would not do very well.

However, I didn’t. I wasn’t really afraid of exams. I didn’t have to study very hard or long to grasp concepts. I wasn’t really afraid of exams because I rationalized that once an exam began, the outcome was already decided. There’s nothing further I could do about it, and so there was no point being anxious about it. You know what you know, and you don’t know what you don’t know. If I didn’t understand a question, biting my nails off about it wouldn’t help.

This mentality served me for my junior high and high school years. I did well enough that I did not have to put my father’s advice to good use. I could procrastinate until the last minute on most things, bang out a paper in a night or two, and get As & Bs.

This is not to brag. This is a warning. I may have done better than my father in junior high and high school. That all changed afterwards, in post secondary. When I did my first year at the U of A, and also in transferring to Vanguard College, the amount of work I needed to do exponentially exploded. Suddenly I was inundated with essays, research papers, reports, and exams. I couldn’t afford to coast any longer. But I did. Because I had allowed myself to do this style of life for so long, it became a habit. A habit of running away from the reality my father had taught me. If I had embraced what he said, to this day I surely would have benefited from the long hours of studying, the intense research, the diligent report writing, and so on.

I definitely had moments of last second prayers as I went into many exams, many late nights turning into early mornings I wish I would have avoided. What I realize now, that I didn’t know then, was that my father was trying to equip me for my life. He was trying to prepare me for events not in the immediate future, but events that would come eventually.

God, our Heavenly Father, is trying to do the same thing in us, right now. Just like I procrastinated, and still do sometimes get caught in that vicious cycle, we get caught in the cycle of sinfulness. Pastor Tom's sermon series last fall into Addictions speaks perfectly to this. God is trying to prepare us, using His Word the Bible, to equip us for His work that He's going to give to us. I repeat, He has been, is, and always will be equipping us with everything good to do His will.

Where do we learn of this truth? Well, from our passage today.

Turn with me now on your devices, or in your Bibles, to Hebrews Chapter 13:20-25. Today we will be exploring the very end of Chapter 13, which will conclude the book of Hebrews, and also our series together that started in February, the Absolute Uniqueness of Jesus Christ. I'll be reading today from the ESV.

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Final Greetings

I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you."

Much like Pastor Tom, and all those who have served our congregation by speaking up here, at the end of our sermons, we give what's called a benediction. A benediction is a latin word that means "to bless, to wish well."

The author of Hebrews here is finishing off his letter by wishing us well, and blessing us as we finish his letter. He even gives a little information about Timothy's whereabouts, certainly to allay the Hebrews' fears about his life.

We can easily glance over this section because it seems like nothing more than a goodbye. If we did, we miss the monumental lesson that can be learned from it. Let's read that first two verses again;

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

The God of peace wants to equip us to do His will. Through the death of His Son on the cross, He can impart His direct will to us so that we may walk and live as believers, striving for Him.

If this is true, then today, we can be assured of three specific things, which we will delve into. First, **1#**: If God is equipping us for His will, then He must have mightily equipped the leaders of our past **2#**: If God is equipping us for His will, then He will always equip His leaders today for the ministry **3#**: If God is equipping us for His will, how do we accept and step into that will?

I think one of the greatest examples of God's equipping leadership, and the flip side of that coin, is the story of Jonah. A man who could clearly hear God, clearly understood what God's will was, was fully equipped to do that work, and yet completely fell short emotionally for the task at hand.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, **2** *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."* **3** *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord".*

This man knew exactly what the Lord was calling him to do. If the Lord was calling, the Lord is equipping. But Jonah didn't want to. He didn't want to preach the truth to those who had likely slaughtered some of his friends and family in previous battles. Nineveh, which was part of the Assyrian empire, was known for its cruelty to outsiders; certainly its cruelty to Israel. This story is not only a testament of God's faithfulness to the call, but also that He is interested in the salvation of Israel, *and* the salvation of even the staunchest of His enemies.

We know the reality that even though Jonah did not obey the will of the Lord, and tried to run, it got him nowhere. He was ultimately pursued by God until He came to fully understand God's will.

I find this fairly similar to my own situation. Years later, now that post secondary is over for myself, I have admitted to my father that he was right all along. I thought my ways were better, and that even though my father has much more perspective than I do, that I must have been right. In the end, I know he was right. Diligent studying, completing all homework, punctuality at school, all lend themselves to a greater use in later life.

You see it wasn't really the homework, and the studying that I was missing. It was actually the habit of self-control that I wasn't conquering. I have more today than I did back then, but I still need continual reminders to keep on track. Sometimes I wish I had a little bit of a Jonah experience; God pushing me in the direction He wanted for His will to be accomplished in my life.

Following the Heavenly Father's call in your life yields the greatest fruit for your life; the salvation of family, the joys of a continuous relationship with God; things like that. Avoiding the will of the Lord leads to hiding under a withering tree in the desert, and then crying when you don't get your way. Who do you want to be?

So if God is equipping us today to do His sovereign will, what other leaders can we look to? Jonah was an excellent example of a “bad” leader which God used anyway. Nehemiah is an excellent example of a “good” leader, who followed the ways of the Lord at every opportunity.

Nehemiah, living in the 5th century BC, hears of the destruction of Israel. He recalls the sins of Israel and God’s promise of restoration. He asks King Artaxerxes to leave Susa, and depart to rebuild Jerusalem. Our first sign that God’s will is lining up with this goal is that the door for this opportunity is opened. Remember that. With letters of authorization, he gets to Jerusalem, and he begins the rebuilding process. Enemies rise up, trying to destroy his efforts and his life, but he is yet undeterred. God is continually with Nehemiah.

We know the ending of Nehemiah’s story. The city is completely rebuilt. Nehemiah appoints officials, priests, and brings back Yahweh into their midst. There is mass repentance, and a turning to the Lord. Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem after many years of work, and returns to Susa to serve King Artaxerxes once again.

Nehemiah valiantly desired to serve God, and align his own will with the will of God. He wanted to do what God was calling him to do. Unlike Jonah, he did not reluctantly serve. When the author of Hebrews says, *“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will”*; this is what he is speaking of. It is this kind boldness that he is looking for. This kind of willingness.

In both of these circumstances, leaders of our past were used to embolden and grow the church of God. Whether by desire, or by reluctance; God grows His church. I’ll say point #1 again; **(#1)** If God is equipping us for His will, then He must have mightily equipped the leaders of our past. The Scriptures themselves give evidence to that.

So that was 2500 years ago. Certainly not a blink by any stretch. What about right now then? Is God still doing the same work that He set out to do by Jonah? By Nehemiah?

Yes. He is. God is raising up his people to do His good and perfect will. Yes, he is calling His leaders to do the very same thing.

Brian preached last week about the importance of leadership within the church. How we should be honouring our leaders above us, and trusting that the Lord has placed them in that position for our own benefit, to ease our burdens even. This benediction from the author of Hebrews solidifies this reality even more.

If God is equipping us for His will, then He will always equip His leaders today for the ministry. God has raised brothers and sisters up for specific services and specific times. When things come together, we sense once again that the Lord has brought things together.

In our own church, around the time the pandemic broke out last March, Pastor Serge had an idea prepared that we would serve meals to those in our church and in our community who were in need. That service, under the leadership of Cindy Lou Hyde and Elizabeth Kuhn,

runs to this day. Each week, there are meals prepared. Each week, they are delivered. If it wasn't for leaders in these positions, and our amazing volunteers who have given up so much time and effort to make this happen, the hands and feet of Christ; His divine will, would not be able to be carried out. God raised up these leaders to complete His will for His purposes. We may not always understand why things occur when they do. Or why some outcomes are not what we desire; but what we do know, is that God equips us with everything good that you may do his will, by the blood of the eternal covenant, in the death of Jesus Christ. God did the same thing for the prophets of the Old Testament, He did the same for the new Christians in the 1st century millenia ago, and He continues on in this tradition today.

Being part of the body of Christ is crucial for this will to be discerned. 1 Corinthians 12:19-20 "*If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*" Each member of this Christ body is required to discern the will of the Lord. We need each other in order to weed out heresy, egotism, lies, pride, self-righteousness. It's when we come together as the body of Christ that we truly accomplish the will of the Lord. Verse 21, "The eye cannot say 'I have no need for you'". We do that each Sunday when we meet in this room. We do that during our weeks when we meet together to study the Word of God in groups. Do not neglect to meet together to discern the will of the Lord.

Pastor Tom returns back next week to preach for the first time since Easter Sunday. This is a man after God's own heart. A man who was called decades ago to serve the Lord faithfully, who wants to finish His time in ministry well, and who is earnestly seeking where God is leading His people through the world's trials and tribulations. We have prayed as a staff that this time has been rejuvenating for Him; that God has granted him tremendous insight.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray that when Pastor Tom returns, he senses this benediction is upon him; the "Great Benediction". Continue praying that God equips His leaders over us. They are our guides in our storms, a rudder on a large ship. And Christ is at the wheel.

Finally, you're asking "how does this matter to me, then?" Point number 3 as I mentioned; If God is equipping us for His will, how do we accept and step into that will?

It starts with repentance. Peter is preaching at Solomon's Portico in the book of Acts. The rulers of Israel surround him. The apostles have just healed a lame beggar, and the swathes of people are astounded. Peter says to them, "*Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.*" (Acts 3:19-20).

Christ the intermediary intercedes on our behalf for our sins in heaven. If you don't know God here today, and you're wondering about what that looks like, it's very simple. You admit that nothing you can do can save your soul. No act on earth that you commit to, except that of repentance, gains you access to the Holy One of Israel.

Okay, that's step one. We've accepted we're sinners. Now what. We've heard that very often before. How do we step into His will?

We begin to pray. We begin to seek where the Lord would have us go, praying also our desires too. God doesn't just completely cast those aside, by no means. He knows our hearts. But we pray because we want God to reveal His direction for ourselves. Proverbs 3:5-6; "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will **make straight your paths***" Psalm 37: 23-24; "*The steps of a man are established by the Lord, **when he delights in his way**; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the **Lord upholds his hand.***"

You see, when we walk in the way of the Lord, He delivers us. He walks with us. How do you step into His will? Step into daily prayer for His will in your life.

Now I had a friend when I was younger. He would pray for signs about what he was supposed to do in everything in his life. He would pray every day that God would just push him in a direction so that he could get his life started. But it didn't happen. Instead he stagnated.

Something you must know is that in prayer for the Lord's will in your life, and His providing His will for you, it doesn't mean there will only ever be one single door opening at a time. Sometimes we aren't entirely sure, and God is okay with that. We have free will to choose. And sometimes God is waiting for us to make that decision in order to bless it. We imagine in our heads this perfect golden path, and if we make the wrong decision, we have somehow left the path forever.

That's not God. He works with you, where you're at right now. And that's the final part of how we step into His will. We make decisions, and then we follow through. We don't just pray endlessly for His will to be done. We execute the decision. We pray, and then we act. We want discernment surely, but then, we move on it.

1#: If God is equipping us for His will, then He must have mightily equipped the leaders of our past **2#:** If God is equipping us for His will, then He will always equip His leaders today for the ministry **3#:** If God is equipping us for His will, then we must step into that equipping, with repentance, belief and prayer, and then we act on His direction and take bold steps.

That is the greatest benediction we could know. The greatest blessing. That in our trivial daily lives, God moves. He is there. He is blessing. He is working things together for our good.

Let me close in prayer:

- Open hearts to receive the Gospel
- We would step into decisions you're leading us to
- Thankful for our leaders who you appointed

-Pray for Pastor Tom's return next week