

My NIV Study Bible calls chapter 13 of Hebrews, "Concluding Exhortations." I think it also sounds like a pretty apt title for this devotional since it's the final lesson of this year's Women's Bible Study. At first, I wasn't sure how to approach this passage because it had the feeling of not much more than a mishmash of advice, like what you would get from your parents as you're heading off into adulthood. I didn't see enough earth-shaking content to fill a 30-minute lecture. But then as 2020 started, in a way, the earth did indeed shake! (For those of you reading this in the far future and wondering what I'm referring to, please consult a history book—but the rest of you know what I'm talking about!) In unprecedented times, we have been told to isolate ourselves in our homes as much as possible, keeping us away from jobs, school, and community. We live in fear that we, or worse, our loved ones might become ill. The news is full of dire predictions about the economy, the food supply, and pretty much everything else we have come to depend on. And it seems to me that everything is just more difficult to do—and that includes being a Christian! Between boredom, stress, and uncertainty, many of us have been put into situations where we've been tempted in ways we have managed to avoid in the past. So maybe these Concluding Exhortations are just what our souls need to feed on.

The writer wastes no words in giving us his first exhortation: love one another.

He goes on to give us some concrete examples of what this looks like: show hospitality, remember those in prison for their faith, honor the bonds of marriage, do good to others, and be generous. I suspect that the writer was thinking of some specific scenarios affecting these early believers; however, the admonitions still apply to us today.

What applications can you think of in your own situation? Hospitality? Even though we've been told to stay away from other people, there are still many ways we can reach out in Jesus' name, sharing our food and resources. Imprisoned Christians? Instead of focusing on our own "imprisonment," we should remember those Christians in other parts of the world who truly are suffering and imprisoned for their faith. We are being called to look beyond our own discomforts and do what we can to support and pray for them. Marriage? Not all of us are married; however, with extra time on our hands, we can be led to entertainment venues that fill our minds with unwholesome images that can

color our relationships with Christian brothers and sisters. Love of money? Well, some things never change! But this might be one of our biggest challenges right now. With the constant reports of shortages and economic crises looming in the future, it is easy to begin excessively stocking up on food, squirreling away money, and even cutting back on tithing. Having Christ-like love for others and putting them first requires a certain and often painful amount of self-denial.

Before I go further though, I don't want to ignore the fact that there's a lot of love presently being shown by non-Christians. There have been a lot of heartwarming stories on the news about generosity and courage out there in the world; so what makes Christian love any different? Love as the world expresses it has limits, because we finite humans can so easily reach the end of our motivation and resources. It is easy to become overwhelmed and discouraged by the seemingly bottomless pit of need and suffering in the world and the paltry supply of resources to meet this need. But the love that comes from Jesus draws from the bottomless well of his great love for us; the love he demonstrated in the shedding of his blood. And best of all, the love we express in his name carries eternal significance! Verses 5b-6 give us the confidence to love sacrificially in uncertain times: *...God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"*

When you are tempted to withdraw into a safe place of your own making, remember these verses too:

Romans 8:32

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And in the words of our Lord Jesus, Luke 12:22-34

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his

splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A second strong exhortation in this chapter is for us to stand firm in our faith, or as verse 9 begins, *“Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.”* We’ve learned over the past year that a primary focus of the book of Hebrews was to keep these early Christians away from compromising their faith with false or useless rituals, so we can’t blame the writer for bringing this up one more time. While times have changed in terms of popular religions and philosophies, our hearts have not changed, and we are constantly tempted to wander away from the powerful truth of the gospel. What strange teachings might we be carried off by during these times of uncertainty? Is it possible that you are finding yourself drawn excessively to “end times” literature or “health and wealth” theology? Or are you filling your mind with the ideology of self-help gurus or opinionated news broadcasters? While you might find some weak biblical truths in these sources, they can easily become a false gospel and draw your heart away from Jesus. Your heart may become filled with excessive worry, bargaining with God, self-sufficiency, or distrust in authority while it is pulled away from solid trust in God’s promises and love. In our human frailty, we look to other humans for answers, but we really need to go back to God’s Word. Like everything else nowadays, staying engaged with Christian fellowship and Bible study are difficult, but they are our lifeline! In the middle of this chapter, we see an amazing fact about the nature of Jesus: Verse 8 tells us that *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* Our hearts may wander, human history may progress, calamity may find us, but Jesus will never change. He is the solid rock that we build our lives upon.

Paul shares this thought in Colossians 2: 6-10

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.

So these two claims about Jesus (vv 5-6, 8) are spiritual treasures that we can keep in our hearts as we move forward into 2020. Loving others and standing firm in our faith go hand in hand. We can love because Jesus has promised to stay with us and provide for us no matter what calamity might befall. We can stand firm in the never-changing truth of the Gospel because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Living in these truths can change everything from the biggest life choices to the smallest day-to-day decisions. I've been thinking about this recently as our family has been making decisions about supporting the church and other worthy charities while also trying to be wise with our resources and plans for our future. And my heart was revealed to me through a silly but significant example:

I consider myself a savvy grocery shopper and have always been in the habit of "stocking up" when I see a good price. A few weeks ago when the church was collecting for the food cupboard, I went through my pantry and realized that I had, over the past few months, collected about 6 jars of peanut butter. It was our favorite brand and had been on sale! I found myself hesitating for a minute, reluctant to part with my treasure. What if peanut butter became one of those scarce commodities and we ended up running out? Or worse, what if I had to buy it later at *full price*? I had a brief spiritual struggle as I pulled a few jars out of the pantry and surrendered that tiny bit of my future to the Lord's providence. Jesus will never leave me, he will provide out of his great love, so I can be generous to others in his name!

As the weeks progress, bigger issues continue to loom on the horizon. Watching the smoothly running machinery of our society begin to slow down and sputter, I'm beginning to worry about my future: Job? Retirement? Investments? What seemed pretty solid is starting to look a little fragile, but the promises of God are unswerving. Hebrews 6:19 (one of my favorite verses) echoes this truth: "We

have this hope (Jesus) as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” We might change, the world may shake, but God and his promises will not.

Let us end with verses 20-21, a benediction to encourage us as we go forward!

Now may the God of peace,

who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead
our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

equip you with everything good for doing his will,

and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus
Christ,

to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.