

## Remembering the One Body: A Reading of Hebrews 13

*Reading the Bible a certain way changes the heart.*  
Ephraim Radner

*“Let brotherly love continue”* (Heb. 13:1). I’ve been arguing that Hebrews is concerned to show how the sacrifices of Cain and Abel both fail, and how *Jesus’* sacrifice, as pure gift, exposes those failures in the light of the fire of the love of God. Hebrews wants us to see how that love, flaming forth in Jesus’ priestly self-offering, consumes all other offerings—undoing for Abel what Cain did and doing for Cain what Abel did not. Now, at the end of the letter, we’re told that brotherly love must continue. And thanks to Jesus, who’s proud to call us brothers, it can and does. We are, just as he is, God’s kith and kin.

This chapter may seem like a random list of instructions and imperatives. But in fact it’s a cunningly conversionary conclusion, one that by its form catches us up into the form of life it calls for.

Two weeks ago, while we were discussing the first part of Hebrews 12, someone asked if verse 13 is an oblique reference to Jacob and his wounding: “make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.” They pointed out that Esau is mentioned in verse 16, described as “an immoral and godless person... who sold his birthright for a single meal” (Heb. 12:16).

I must’ve had that observation in mind while I read, because the opening lines of chapter 13 struck me suddenly as a reference to *these* brothers. The preacher has already impressed on us the fact that Esau came under God’s judgment for defiling marriage with his wickedness. And who, if not Jacob, “entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2)?

Seeing that, I recognized other details as callbacks to the Jacob and Esau story, including the references to meals in tents (Heb. 13:10) and the warning against wearying the leaders in the community as Esau had wearied his parents (Heb. 13:17).

That in turn forced me back to Heb. 10: 34 and made me hear it differently: “For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.” Telling them that they’ve no reason to fear the plundering of their possession, the preacher identifies his Christian hearers with *Esau*—whom Jacob plundered, as Israel later plundered Egypt. Imitating the logic of Romans 9-11, the preacher identifies them both with the elect and the non-elect, Israel and the nations, Jacob and Esau. An identification already realized in Christ.

Heb. 13:20-21:

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, “make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, as he works among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.

Jesus, the great shepherd, identifies himself with Israel’s shepherd-fathers: Abel and Jacob. But he does this for Cain’s and Esau’s sake—so that true sacrifices can be made for the sake of a meal at which birthrights can be shared. That is what it means for brotherly love to continue.

The Joseph story is key, too. He is the one who is thrown in prison by his brothers (Heb. 13:3). He is the one who is forgotten and needs to be remembered. The preacher’s encouragement about the strengthening of the heart (Heb. 13:9) reminded that Joseph’s brothers, not yet recognizing him, lose heart when they find that the Egyptian “lord of the land” had hidden their money in the sacks of grain he had given them (Gen 42:26-28)—an act of hospitality that could only be read as hostility because they had not rightly remembered their brother.

Everything turns, I think, on Hebrews 13:3: “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” That last phrase is mistranslated, I believe. The Greek is clear: *καὶ αὐτοὶ ὄντες ἐν σώματι*—“as though you yourselves are in the body.”

*The* body—the body of the accursed Jesus strung up outside the camp. The body of a sacrifice not consumed but consuming, offered not in the holy place but (as Timothy Radcliffe has said) in the unholy place of all, the place of defiled carcasses.

We can, therefore, go to him—contemplatively, actively—and bear now, in our own bodies, the abuse he endured then, the abuse Joseph had endured, the abuse Abel had endured, the abuse Cain and Esau were not faithful enough to endure. “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world” (Pascal).

This is, of course, the Christological mysticism of Paul the apostle, which comes to expression emphatically in passages like these: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:19-21). “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24).

The theology of Hebrews is a Pauline mysticism of co-suffering intercession, a subversive and missional mystagogy. That, I think, is why the preacher directs his hearers’ attention back to “our brother Timothy” (Heb. 13:23). Timothy, imitating Paul’s faith, chained as Paul had been for the gospel’s sake, is participating in Christ’s brotherly love. And soon he will be “set free” (Heb. 13:24)—not merely released from prison “in time” but raised from the dead into eternity.

The preacher (like Pseudo-Dionysius) enters into that imitation himself, urging them to pray that he might be restored to them (Heb. 13:19) as Paul had said he and Timothy and Onesimus desired to be restored to Philemon and his household (Philemon 1:22).

This kind of imitation is possible because there is, in the end, *one* body—the body of the Good Shepherd, who bears in himself the marks of slaughter. It is the integrity of this body that secures over time the apostolic message we have to hear and hold fast. We participate in Christ’s sufferings as the prophets before us did. They suffered pre-figuringly. We suffer re-figuringly. Because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and into the ages to come, we can be sure that the message we are

hearing from our leaders is the same one delivered to the apostles. Knowing that, our hearts are strengthened and we are secured against the storms of false teaching (Heb. 13:7-9). Given his strength, we can “bear” the weight of glory given in the teaching (Heb. 13:22). And share it with others.