

8. After a series of exhortations directed at his readers and their abiding faithfulness, the writer petitioned them to pray for him in the same way (13:18-19). Though he instructed them as a teacher and assumed the authority to challenge them to continue on and grow in their faith and faithfulness, he was not above them or exempt from the pressures they faced. His perseverance in the faith was just as dependent on their ministry to him as theirs was on him. He recognized with respect to himself what he pressed upon his readers: By the Spirit's design, it is the Body that causes the well-being and growth of the Body. These Hebrews needed his encouragement and exhortation, and he needed theirs.

Specifically, the writer exhorted them to keep him (and his unnamed companions) in their prayers to the Father, that they would be able to stand firm and faithful in whatever circumstances or challenges confronted them: *"Pray for us, for we are sure we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner."* He didn't elaborate further, and this has led scholars down different paths.

- Some believe the writer was imprisoned at the time, and this makes sense of both aspects of his petition: seeking to persevere in his own faithfulness, and to be reunited soon to this community of believers. It's impossible to be sure, but this view certainly fits the sort of circumstances and experiences he addressed with his readers (ref. again 10:32-36).
- Others believe that the writer wasn't referring to anything in particular, but was simply asking for prayer that he and his associates would continue to be faithful in their walk, maintaining a good conscience, and that the Lord would see fit to allow him to be reunited soon with these brethren he loved. Paul often spoke this way, and this is exactly the sort of prayer request one would expect a Christian to present in a letter to fellow believers (cf. Romans 1:8-10, 15:30-32; Ephesians 6:18-20; Philippians 1:12-20; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2; Philemon 19-22).

Again, there's no way to be certain about the writer's circumstance – indeed, his personal identity is uncertain. But his petition does illumine a few important considerations.

- a. First, he expressed his conviction, on behalf of himself and those with him, of a *good conscience* – i.e., that they were faithful disciples of Jesus. He didn't identify those other individuals, but asserted that they as a group were unaware of anything that could strip them of a settled conscience. Speaking collectively like this, it seems clear he was speaking *ministerially* rather than *personally*. That is, their "good conscience" pertained to their faithfulness in fulfilling their calling on behalf of the Lord and His gospel; the writer wasn't in any way claiming a faultless personal life, either for himself or for his companions. Such perfection doesn't exist; the most a person can claim is that he has no conscious awareness of error or violation (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:12; 2 Timothy 1:1-3 with 1 Corinthians 4:1-4). All the writer was saying was that he and his associates were persuaded of their integrity and faithfulness in carrying out the work the Lord had entrusted to them, and he sought prayer toward the end that they would persevere in it.

- b. Secondly, the writer's petition underscores his closeness with these Hebrews and his sense of dependence on them and their ministry to him. His heart was intertwined with theirs, and thus he wrote to them as a *brother* in Christ – not as presenting them with a technical theological treatise, but to encourage them and strengthen their faith by nurturing their knowledge and maturity in Jesus.

He wrote out of a heart of intimate, devoted love, and he believed these readers shared the same love for him. Thus he petitioned them for their prayer, not as a platitude or passing sentiment, but with the conviction that their ongoing intercession on his behalf was vital to his own faithfulness, and that the Father who loved and heard them would honor their prayers and meet his need. Though in many ways he was their *rabbi* and discipler in the faith, the writer recognized that he was just as dependent on his readers as they were on him. He ministered to them according to the obligation of faith working through love, but he was in need of exactly the same ministrations from them (Galatians 5:6; cf. also 2 Corinthians 1:8-14, 6:1-7:16, 11:1-12:21). He petitioned their prayer on his behalf, not as a superior calling upon the service of his inferiors, but as a brother and fellow-sharer in the faith and life of the Lord Jesus. Whatever his authority regarding them, he was dependent on them, and their ministry to him was precious as well as necessary. It is the Body that brings growth to the Body.

- c. The writer acknowledged his dependence on these Hebrews by petitioning their prayer on his behalf, but he also shared with them his specific burdens. His closeness with them allowed him to profess his good conscience without seeming arrogant or pretentious – they knew him well enough to know that he wasn't making a foolish or flippant claim. But that same intimacy also allowed him to humble himself before them and confess his concern that his faithfulness should not give way, but that his good conscience would endure, whatever might come.

Interestingly, many scholars and commentators have viewed the writer's petition for prayer as his way of explaining and defending his instruction and tone in his epistle. The premise is that the author expected his letter's directness (and perhaps his treatment of Judaism) to likely offend some of the readers and cause them to push back against him. Thus he asserted his good conscience in the hope of reassuring them that he wrote out of a heart of concern and devoted love, not to indict or "lord it over them," but to encourage them and minister to their faith. He wanted them to understand that he wrote with a good conscience; it was his love and jealousy for them that motivated his instruction, exhortations and warnings.

There is perhaps some truth in this, yet it seems to oversimplify the writer's point. The epistle makes clear the intimate relationship between him and these Hebrews, so why would he need to justify his words and explain his motives? Yes, he had been away from them for some time, but the letter itself indicates that time and distance hadn't diminished their closeness. But whether or not he felt he needed to explain himself, he clearly wanted to affirm his solidarity with these brethren: he, too, needed to persevere in faith; to conduct himself honorably in all things.

- d. The author wanted his readers to know that he was committed to proving himself faithful in all things. Indeed, this commitment provoked his letter and all that he wrote in it. He was determined to persevere in faith as Jesus' disciple, whatever may come, and he had the same burden for these beloved Hebrew brethren. What he sought for himself, he sought for them, and he penned this letter out of that longing. Thus he asked them to pray, not only that the Lord would enable him to maintain his good conscience, but also that He'd be pleased to reunite them soon.

Some have viewed this reunion in terms of *reconciliation*, with the premise being that some form of tension or estrangement had developed between the writer and his readers. But there is no hint of this in the epistle. Yes, he spoke directly and pointedly, even strongly warning them at times, but he did so because of the mutual love and devotion that existed between them. He wrote to them as beloved brethren, and instructed and exhorted them as being *one with them* (cf. 2:1-4, 3:1-14, 4:1-11, 5:11-6:12, 8:1-2, 10:19-39, 11:39-40, 12:1-10, etc.).

And so, whatever had kept him from these Hebrews (imprisonment, sickness, ministry obligations, travel difficulty, etc.), he longed to be reunited with them. Perhaps he was originally part of their local community as a Jewish believer, or he may have simply developed a deep intimacy with them because of his labors among them. There's no way to know for certain, but his statement about Timothy (13:23) indicates that he had some connection with Paul's ministry, and so perhaps he was traveling with Paul at that time. (This is one reason some believe Silas or Barnabas penned this letter, or even Paul himself.)

- e. Finally, it's important to note that, though the writer longed to return to these brethren he so dearly loved, he recognized that his times and seasons were in the Lord's hands, and he needed to yield himself to His providential and ministerial will. Thus he communicated his longing, not in terms of his own agenda and plans, but in a petition for *prayer*. His desire was to be reunited with them, but only as their Father brought it to pass. And so he asked his readers to join him in seeking the Father's leading and provision for that outcome, while resting, as he did, in His wise purpose and good pleasure.

Recognizing the *new creation* that God has inaugurated in Jesus, the writer understood that the day is coming when there will no longer be any separation of any sort. Separation – in every one of its expressions – marks the cursed creation, and Jesus has conquered the curse by His death and resurrection. He reconciled the entire creation to His Father (Colossians 1:19-20), and even now is gathering up human beings into His Father's life (Ephesians 2:1-22). That ingathering is the *firstfruits* of the new creation – the pledge of the future day when all things in the created order will be perfectly united and “summed up” in the Messiah, so that the Creator-Father will at last be “all in all” (Romans 8:18-23; Ephesians 1:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). But for now, *prayer* is the fundamental and most profound expression of the new creation and the “I in you and you in me” intimacy it established. Animated and empowered by the shared Spirit, prayer binds the children to their Father and one another, thereby enabling the Body to grow the Body.