

ENCOURAGEMENT TO PRAYER

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"Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need"
Hebrews 4:14-16

It appears from several passages scattered up and down this epistle, that the Hebrews (that is, the believing Jews) to whom it was written, were undergoing many severe trials and persecutions. In fact, the brunt of persecution seemed especially to fall upon them, and this chiefly from their unbelieving brethren. A profession, therefore, in those days could not, as in ours, be taken up at very little cost, and carried on with very little personal sacrifice. It began in difficulty; it was carried on in difficulty; and it often ended in the death of the person who made it. The apostle in our text seems to have an eye to this, and to encourage those to whom he is writing to maintain their profession firmly and unwaveringly. But on what ground does he put the encouragement? Does he put it upon this ground, "Summon up all your strength; call up every motive power you possess; put your shoulder to the wheel?" He does not thus appeal to any power that they possessed in themselves; he puts it entirely upon other ground. "Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." And in order to encourage them still more to hold fast their profession, he

points out some marks and characteristics of this great High Priest, that he is not unfeeling and insensible of what takes place in regard to his people upon earth. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities;" he knows what it is to be touched with a feeling of our helplessness, weaknesses, and infirmities, and this not from a theoretical knowledge, "but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." But it might be said, "This is very blessed and true, but how are we to derive any comfort from it? "There is," he says, "a throne of grace set up, a throne of mercy erected and appointed; and to it you must come with your wants, trials, temptations, and difficulties." "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Thus we may see, if God enable us, the connection betwixt these three verses before us, and how applicable they are to every tried and tempted child of God.

The apostle then gives us:

I. An *exhortation*: "Let us hold fast our profession."

II. The *ground* why we should do so. That we have (1) "a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God;" and (2) One who can be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities." III. An *Invitation* that we should "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

I. Though we have not in our day open persecution, nor fire and sword to encounter, such as made a profession so difficult in primitive times, yet we have trials, temptations, and difficulties as perplexing in their measure as ever the first Christians had. It is true that the outward face of things is changed; but the inward face of things is not. Besides, we

have reason to believe that the Lord in those days bestowed more abundant consolations, clearer manifestations, brighter testimonies, more immediate answers to prayer, more discoveries of his goodness and love, than he favours the church of God with, for the most part, now. Had they more outward suffering? They had more inward consolation. Did they risk their lives with their profession? The Lord supported them under all their sufferings and tribulations. Did they maintain their profession at the risk of everything dear to the flesh? The Lord enabled them cheerfully to part with all, through the sweet manifestations of his love towards them.

But a true, genuine profession of religion will be always accompanied with difficulties. None but God himself, I am well convinced, can ever keep us alive unto his glory, and enable us to hold fast that profession with a good conscience. For instance, look, 1st. At our *backsliding* hearts. Our nature is bent upon backsliding; it is ever prone to evil; it goes as naturally after idols as a stone falls to the ground, or as a flame ascends into the air. Where then this backsliding heart is perpetually drawing a man aside, how hard it is to maintain an upright, sincere, honest, and gracious profession of vital godliness! 2nd. Again, *Satan* is continually thrusting at God's people. Sometimes he works upon their unbelief, sometimes he stirs up the infidelity of their fallen nature, sometimes hurls fiery darts into their minds, sometimes he spreads snares to entangle their feet, sometimes he works upon the passions and lusts of their fallen nature, sometimes he attempts to deceive them as an angel of light, and sometimes he so confuses their minds and perplexes their thoughts that they hardly know where they are, or what they are. They cannot "see their signs," nor read their evidences clearly. 3rd. Sometimes a man's *very desire to be honest and sincere* before God will almost make him say, "I can make a profession no more, for I have so few evidences and so few

marks of God's grace; there are so few fruits of the Spirit in me that it seems mocking God to go on in a profession any longer." So that what with the inward evils of our hearts, the temptations of Satan, and the numerous perplexities the mind gets entangled in, the deadness, darkness, coldness, and unbelief we are continually assailed with, it seems now almost as hard as it was in primitive days to keep up a consistent profession of vital godliness, or even to drag one spiritual limb after another.

II. But how does the apostle meet this difficulty? What ground does he give for holding fast our profession? This! (1) "Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." As though he should say, "There is an ample supply for you laid up in the fulness of the Son of God. It is true that it is very difficult to maintain your profession. It is true that there are times and seasons when it appears as though you must abandon it and give all up. But," he says, "look at the secret supply, at the hidden source of all your strength." "We have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God." But why should this be the ground for holding fast our profession? Because, if it is a true profession, Jesus is the Author and Jesus is the Finisher of it. What read we? "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession" (or profession, the word is the same) "is made unto salvation" (Rom.10:10). What is the root, then, of all sound profession? Is it not faith? What was the root of the profession that the eunuch made when he was solemnly baptised in the name of the Lord? What did Philip say to him? "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Faith in Christ as the Son of God was the ground of his profession; and it must be the ground of ours, if it be genuine. Now,

Jesus is declared in the Scripture to be "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb.12:2). It is from him our faith comes, if we have a grain; and that faith he will finish, because "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil.1:6).

Here, then, is encouragement. Did Jesus look upon you when you were in your blood? When you were a rebel, did he cast an eye of pity and compassion upon you? Did he separate you from the world? Did he constrain you to call upon his name? Did he bring you to his footstool, and afterwards reveal himself? Did he endear himself to your heart? He is then the Author of living faith in your soul, and he will be the Finisher. And what is the pledge? The priesthood of Christ. "Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens."

The priesthood of Christ is one of the grand fundamental doctrines of the gospel. You will find it is blessedly set forth in the Epistle to the Hebrews. But what were the offices of the High Priest? I will just mention two. One was to offer sacrifice, another to offer prayer and supplication. When Jesus was upon earth he offered a sacrifice; his own spotless body and soul. That was the propitiation which he made as great High Priest, when he offered himself as the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. But he has passed into heaven; he is risen from the dead; he is ascended up where he was before. He sits now at God's right hand as the Mediator, Intercessor, and Advocate of God's church and people. There he performs the second part of the priestly office, that of prayer; for the court of heaven is filled with the incense of his blood and obedience, and thus by his intercession there is the perpetual rising up of the incense of his sacrifice before the throne of God.

But how is this connected with the holding fast of our profession? It is connected with it thus. God has accepted the sacrifice of Christ. It is the propitiation for sin whereby God hath reconciled his church and people to himself, and by virtue of that sacrifice he sends down his blessed Spirit into their hearts to make Jesus known. Nay more; Jesus himself lives and intercedes within the veil, and says, "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19). So that the holding fast of our profession is put not upon what we are, have been, or ever can be, but upon this, that we have a great High Priest, the Son of God, in our own nature, at the right hand of the Father, perpetually interceding for us. In other words, we have a friend at court; and because we have a friend there, we shall have the ear of the King. Jesus is this Friend, "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Prov.18:24). He has the ear of the Father, for it is said the Father continually hears him, and grants him all the desires of his soul. "The God of Israel grant thee thy petition" (1 Sam.1:17). This suits well one who from day to day is tempted to cast aside his profession, and to say, "It is of no use going on any longer. I am such a sinner, live so little to God's glory, and am so little inwardly what I seem to be outwardly." How suitable then is this truth: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God," on this ground, "let us hold fast our profession." His blood still cleanseth from all sin; his righteousness is still from everlasting to everlasting; his love is still unceasing, and he himself "the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb.13:8). You fluctuate; you change; the weather is not more unstable than you are; but he changes not. In him there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Jas.1:17). Then what an encouragement is here for a poor, tempted, tried child of God still to hold fast his profession that he has a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens, there to be his Surety and Advocate at the right

hand of the Majesty on high!

(2). But the apostle adds a sweet encouragement as a still further motive to hold fast our profession: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." What is the main thing that makes you at times afraid about your profession? Is it not because you feel so much sin working in you; because you are not what you wish to be; because so many evils are perpetually discovering themselves; because you seem to live so little to God's glory? Now the apostle thus meets this feeling: "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities." This great High Priest is not for men who are righteous, holy, and pure in themselves. Such are not the subjects of his kingdom. He makes his subjects indeed perfect by clothing them in his perfections, and sanctifies them by making them partakers of his holiness. But as to their own feelings, as to the confessions of their hearts, it is far otherwise with them. If then we are to wait until we are perfect, until we are holy, for Jesus to have pity upon us, we shall never have him to look upon us with compassion at all. The apostle therefore tells us, "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities;" as though he would say, "He is a sympathising High Priest; he carries a tender heart in his bosom; he is not one who cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, he knows what we are; he reads our hearts, and sees their every movement, for all things are naked and open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do." O he looks on our infirmities as touched with the feeling of them, tender, sympathising, and compassionate!

How often we mistake the character of the Lord Jesus Christ! We know that he is holy, a Lamb without blemish and

without spot, and therefore this feeling works in our minds, "He cannot look upon me, for I am unholy." We measure him by a human standard. "Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou" (Isa.65:5). But the Lord Jesus Christ, though he is perfect, spotless, and holy, yet when he looks down from the throne of his mercy upon all the infirmities of his people, is touched with sympathising feelings; for his heart is full of compassion and loving-kindness. Let us carry this out from an illustration of what he was in the days of his flesh. He had not a spot of disease in his body. Bear that in mind, he was not like us. Some people talk about the mortal body of the Lord Jesus Christ. His body was not mortal. It is true it was capable of dying; but there was no mortality in it, nor disease. We never read in the Word of God that the Lord had anything like human sickness. Human sickness is the result of sin; and the Lord being perfectly free from every taint of sin, his body was therefore free from every taint of sickness or disease. Yet he could pity and cure human disease. When he saw Peter's wife's mother lying in a fever, he could come and rebuke that fever. When he saw a leper, he could cleanse him. Whatever disease a man was afflicted with, with a look, with a word, he could chase that disease away. So in a higher sense, though the Lord Jesus Christ has no sin in him, not a speck, not a spot, not a stain, not a blemish; yet he can look upon those who are all sin, a mass of iniquity from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, diseased and defiled throughout, and pity and cure them. Now is not this an encouragement for a poor sinner to look to this blessed Lord? We have not a stoical High Priest, one wrapped up in a monkish holiness, that says, "Come not near to me; for I am holier than thou" (Isa.65:5). No; we have not a High Priest who is so wrapped up in his sanctity that he has no eye to look off himself.

Such is a Hindu god, wrapped up in the contemplation of his

own holiness. But the Lord Jesus Christ, though so glorious in majesty and holiness, yet has bowels of compassion, love, and infinite mercy towards those who are full of sin and infirmity. What would become of us if it were otherwise? Damnation would be our lot if this great High Priest were not "touched with the feeling of our infirmities." Your coldness, deadness, barrenness, hardness, darkness, unbelief, infidelity, and all the workings of a corrupt nature often cause piteous lamentations and complaints to go up out of your bosom. O you have a great High Priest, one that is touched with the feeling of your infirmities. As a tender mother, who when her child cries in the cradle feels it because she is touched with pity and compassion for her offspring, so our great High Priest is touched and his heart melts with a sense of sympathising pity for the infirmities of his poor, needy ones. But some might say, "Yes, we believe all that, but Jesus cannot have had the experience of these things as we have them." O, but the apostle adds, "But was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." He has not a mere theoretical acquaintance with temptations; but he himself has passed through the like sufferings. That is plain from the text: "In all points tempted like as we are." And in all temptations he was "without sin." Now I consider this a very deep and mysterious subject, which we can scarcely speak upon, lest we darken counsel by words without knowledge. This is the mystery, how he could be "tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin." How could this be? I will tell you as far as I can understand it. When you and I are tempted of Satan, we have a carnal principle in our hearts that falls in with his temptation; and it is this falling in with temptation that constitutes sin. I will show you this in the Word of God. What says James? "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (ch.1:14,15). You see, in

order that sin may be brought forth, there must be a conception. Temptation from Satan alone is not our sin. But when his temptation and our lust meet together, sin is their miserable progeny. Now the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted. We find this wonderfully set forth in Matthew 4:10. But temptation dropped off him as an arrow from a shield of steel; there is no dent made by it. The arrow may be very sharp, and may be drawn by a powerful hand: it touches the shield of steel, and drops down powerless. Some then may say, "If this be the case, how could the Lord sympathise with us?" What is it in you that feels temptation? It is not your carnal mind; that loves sin. Is it not then your spiritual mind? Is not that grieved? Does not that groan under, and is it not distressed by sin? But look at the Lord Jesus Christ. How his holy nature, how his pure and spotless soul must have been beyond measure grieved and distressed; yes, inexpressibly distressed by the temptations which the artillery of hell shot against him! So, though the Lord Jesus Christ never sinned in thought, word, or deed, yet he was tempted in all points like as we are. So that whatever be our temptations and trials, the Lord Jesus Christ has passed through the like; and therefore, being touched with the feeling of our infirmities, can help, and save, and bless us to the uttermost. What an encouragement this is to the Lord's poor, tempted, and tried people!

III. And this brings the apostle to hold forth the encouraging invitation: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." There is then a throne of grace. But what is the throne of grace? It is said, "A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary" (Jer.17:12). It is the Person of Christ, where grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life; where grace superabounds over the aboundings of sin; where grace sways its

triumphant sceptre over sin, death, and hell. He is the throne of grace to which the Lord's people are invited to come: the mercy-seat from which the Lord communes with them. He invites, nay, bids them to come, and spread all their wants before his footstool. And the text says, "Let us therefore come boldly." Why boldly? Because we have this great High Priest over the house of God, not one who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. "Therefore let us come boldly." Observe the "Therefore." Not because I am holy and righteous, have lived to God's honour, walked very consistently, subdued all my evil passions, and overcome all my besetting sins. O what a miserable ground would that be! It might do for Pharisees, and for them only, to stand on. The apostle does not put that as the ground for coming boldly. But because we have a High Priest who has opened up a way to the throne of grace, that we may come boldly. But what does coming boldly mean? It means coming with sweet liberty; not to stay away, kept back by Satan; not driven off by doubts and fears, full of apprehensions lest the Lord should not hear our prayer. It is to come with sweet liberty in our consciences, and open our mouths before the throne undaunted by sin and Satan, unterrified by the accusations of a fiery law, and not driven back by the many doubts and fears that press upon a tender conscience. "Let us therefore," he says, "come boldly unto the throne of grace." But some may say, "I have sinned; I have backslidden; I am full off exercises, and am sadly tried and tempted." "O," he says, "let not these things keep you back." They often, you know, do keep us back. We dare not go, because we have sinned against God; confusion covers our faces; guilt is contracted; we dare not pray. But says the apostle, "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace;" for we have a great High Priest who has been tempted in all points like as we are.

But what shall we get when we come there? Mercy. "That we may obtain mercy," the sweet manifestations of God's mercy, the discovery of his pardoning love, the shedding abroad of his infinite and eternal favour; that we may have all our sins blotted out, our backslidings healed, and our transgressions cast behind God's back. Nay more, that we may find there all our support, strength, wisdom, consolation, everything our souls may desire: "And find grace to help in time of need," when Satan harasses, when sin distresses, when guilt burdens. O he says, "let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy" from the hand of a kind and loving God, and find grace to help, and strength to support and comfort us in every time of need. But what is the "time of need?" The time of temptation, the time of affliction, and chiefly the time of death, when we have to lay our heads upon a dying pillow. "O," he says, "there is a throne of grace; shall we not go there to obtain mercy, which alone can sweetly comfort our souls in every time of need?" Here is encouragement. What a door the Lord here lays open before us, to encourage us to come to his throne of mercy! And does he lay one atom of weight upon any goodness in the creature, to encourage us to come boldly? Not an atom. May I not then appeal to your consciences whether the testimony of the Spirit here, that we have such a great High Priest, is not an encouragement to a poor soul to come boldly to the throne of grace, who finds nothing in himself but sin, confusion, and misery? We shall never suffer loss by coming there. O may we come often! O may we come boldly, may we come believingly! The Lord will never send any empty away who hang upon him, depending wholly and solely upon his mercy and grace; for in his faithfulness he has promised it. He will not, he cannot deny himself. Though heaven and earth pass away, his Word shall never pass away.