

“Let Us Draw Near”

The Fifteenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 10:19-39; Isaiah 26:1-21

There are some things easily taken for granted. A clean conscience before God based on the knowledge that Jesus Christ made a perfect, once for all sacrifice for sin which turns aside the wrath of God, is a priceless treasure. Yet, people will spend hundreds of dollars per hour to have a counselor or psychiatrist tell them that are OK, that they done nothing wrong, that they couldn't help it, or that it is not their fault. It is easy to take for granted the fact that it is the priestly work of Jesus Christ which secures for us full access to the very presence of God, who graciously hears our prayers only because his beloved son intercedes for us. And it is very easy to take for granted that hope secured for us by Jesus Christ, who having completed his redemptive work on the cross and taken his place at God's right hand, promises to come again to give us all those eternal blessings secured for us by his priestly work. All of these wonderful benefits are ours only because Jesus Christ is our great high priest who offered himself, once and for all, as the final and all sufficient sacrifice for sin. And it is this priestly work of Jesus Christ which secures for us the full assurance of our salvation and the freedom to draw near to God.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews and we will wrap up our time in chapters 9-10. Recall that these two chapters contain a sustained theological argument in which the author makes four important points about the priestly work and office of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 9:1-10, the author explained the purpose and role of the tabernacle, priesthood, and temple, and demonstrated how these are but types and shadows which point ahead to the coming of Jesus. Then, in verses 11-28 of chapter 9, the author argued that our Lord's shed blood does what the Old Testament sacrificial system could not do, take away the guilt of our sins and secure for us an eternal redemption. It is in this section of Hebrews that we find some of the most important explanations anywhere in the New Testament regarding our Lord's priestly work on our behalf, and how the death of Jesus secures our salvation for us, because he has accomplished a perfect and eternal redemption on our behalf.

In our text last time (Hebrews 10:1-18), the author made plain that the death of Jesus has put an end to the validity of the old covenant sacrificial system. The shed blood of bulls and goats is now useless because the sacrifice to which these pointed has already been accomplished. Jesus made his once for all sacrifice for sin, and then sat down at the right hand of God. As we read in verse 14, *“for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* This declaration means that our standing before God has already been secured for us by the same Savior who has died for us.

In our text this time (vv. 19-39 of chapter 10), the author draws our attention to the practical consequences of Jesus Christ's priestly work for us—the wonderful assurance which is now ours by virtue of trusting in what Jesus has already accomplished to save us from our sins. It is because of Jesus Christ's finished work (on the cross and in the heavenly temple) that we have a pure conscience, as well as the confidence necessary to enter into the Lord's presence to worship him, free to offer our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to our great high priest who has done so much to redeem us from our sins. In light of what Jesus has already done for us, the author closes out this section by exhorting us to take advantage of all the blessings and benefits secured for us by our great high priest. And once again, the author sternly warns us not to sow the seeds of apostasy by neglecting these benefits.

With this context in mind, we turn to our text, the second half of Hebrews 10.

The author has already established the fact that the priestly work of Christ has secured for us the greatest of benefits. But at this point, his theological arguments are now followed by an a series of exhortations for Christians to strive to participate in all of those benefits which our high priest has secured for his people—he does so in one long Greek sentence which runs all the way from verse 19 to verse 25.

In chapter 9, the author has already reminded his readers of the very restrictive nature of the old covenant and the worship prescribed at Sinai. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and only then with the proper application of the sacrificial blood. The people could not enter this holy place, and what went on in the tabernacle was hidden from everyone’s sight. Although it was a great blessing to know that God was present with his people in the tabernacle, God kept the people at a distance so that his holiness did not consume them. Not so in the new and better covenant established by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Jesus entered the heavenly temple, and he invites us to seek him there.

The huge contrast between old covenant and new jumps out at us in verse 19. *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.”* Under the old covenant, the presence of God was a very frightening thing—the glory cloud and pillar of fire, lightening and peals of thunder as recounted in Exodus 19 when neither people nor beast could come near the holy mountain. But now that Jesus has completed (once and for all) his redemptive work, and then entered the true holy place (the heavenly temple), we can now enter the holy place with great confidence and without fear. Jesus has prepared the way for us, and the author of Hebrews tells us to seek him there.

The holy place was defined in Hebrews 4:16 as follows: *“let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* We are to draw near to the “holy place” which is the so-called “throne of grace” (where Jesus is), only because the shed blood of Jesus washes away the guilt of our sin so that we are now free to enter into the presence of the holy God, whose holiness would otherwise consume us. The critical point here is that when Jesus finished his redemptive work, he ascended into heaven, sat down at the Father’s right hand, and in doing so gained access for us into the heavenly temple (the throne of grace). Therefore, the confidence we experience in entering into God’s presence, stems not from our worthiness to enter God’s presence, but because this access is secured for us by the priestly work of Jesus Christ.

In verse 20, the author spells out the basis of this confidence—*“by the new and living way that [Jesus] opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.”* It is only because of the priestly work of Jesus Christ (which the author has labored so long and hard to establish in the earlier chapters) that we can enter the holy place. We are again reminded that this access to the throne of grace was gained through Jesus’ sacrifice for sin. His blood was shed upon the cross at precisely the same moment when the veil in the temple in Jerusalem was mysteriously torn in two. Under the old covenant, the Most Holy Place was sealed off from the Holy Place by a heavy veil (or curtain). But there is no veil (or curtain) blocking access to the heavenly temple. This is because they way is now opened to us through the shed blood of our great high priest (i.e., through his flesh).

Lest we forget, as Gentiles, these things don’t have as much meaning for us as they would for a Jew, who learned throughout their lives that only the priests could enter the temple, and only the high priest (who were descendants of Aaron) could enter the Most Holy Place. This was another very powerful argument in terms of proving the superiority of Jesus Christ to the priests of Israel, as well as a reason why the new

covenant is so much better than the old. As the author states in verse 21, “*since we have a great priest over the house of God,*” which is an indication that everything he has said up to this point only proves beyond all doubt that Jesus is much greater than Moses, Aaron, or any of Israel’s priests.

“*The house of God*” is no longer confined to a temple in Jerusalem, or to a tent in the Sinai desert. As the author mentioned back in chapter 3:1-6, God’s house is now the *ecclesia*, or the church, composed of people called out from the nations to assemble on the Lord’s Day to worship the true and living God. This same church is Christ’s spiritual body, a temple composed of living stones, indwelt by the Holy Spirit (a point emphasized by Paul in 1 Corinthians). We are that temple in which God’s Spirit dwells. And Jesus rules this spiritual house as a gracious and merciful high priest.

Based on these theological truths, the author now gives three exhortations to his listeners/readers to take advantage of these wonderful blessings which have been secured for us through the priestly work of Christ. The first of these exhortations is found in verse 22. “*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*” Because Jesus has turned aside God’s wrath from us once and for all, the author exhorts us to draw near to God, trusting that the saving work of Jesus Christ has secured this access for us.

Because our evil consciences have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ (and then signed and sealed unto us in our baptism), we are to draw near to God without fear and with full assurance. But this assurance does not stem from our good works, our great ability to pray, how we feel at any given moment, or how we think we are doing in the Christian life. No, our assurance stems from the fact that Jesus Christ has performed his priestly work for us and in our place. Jesus has already opened the way. We have assurance because we have a great high priest. And since we approach the Father in and through the Son, in the power of the Spirit, *if* we are trusting in Jesus Christ, we need not be afraid of being turned aside or cast from the presence of God. This is why we are to “draw near with a true heart.”

The second exhortation is found in verse 23. “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*” The priestly work of Jesus Christ has been set forth in the types and shadows of the old covenant, and then clearly through his suffering on the cross. But this is followed by his subsequent resurrection and ascension, and since we have confessed him as the son of God, the creator of all things, the mediator of the covenant, and as an eternal priest after the order of Melchizadek, then we should not waver in our confession. We confess that Jesus is our hope, because he is faithful to us, not because we are able to muster great faith, or do anything to earn his favor.

The third exhortation comes in verses 24-25. “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*” Not only should we draw near to God, confess our hope with confidence, we should also stir up brotherly love in one another as well as encouraging each other to do good works. Trusting that Jesus’ priestly work on our behalf is sufficient to save us from our sins should lead us to love one another and to desire to do good works. Therefore, we do these things out of gratitude—our response to what Jesus has already done for us. We must not see the doing of these things as a means of trying to obtain more grace, or as a way to earn benefits from God in exchange. Love and good works should flow freely and joyfully from those who do not live in fear, and who have confidence in the grace of God secured for us by our Savior.

Another important element of this third exhortation is that God’s people should make every effort to regularly attend church—meeting together as the *ecclesia*. Unlike some in the church receiving this

letter—who were somewhere along the road to returning to Judaism, and who had ceased attending worship—we must make every effort not to neglect the word and sacraments. It is primarily in church that we hear the gospel proclaimed, and it is only in the church that we receive the sacraments. It is through assembling together that we encourage one another, and urge one other on to love and good works.

The author also reminds us that Christians are to give special attention to assembling together for worship in difficult times (i.e., “as we see the Day drawing near”). When times are tough (physically, spiritually, emotionally, materially) it is just easier to stay home. But the author of this epistle knows full-well that the seeds of apostasy are sown to that degree we neglect the word, the sacraments, and the fellowship of other struggling pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city.

In verses 26-31, the author offers another sort of exhortation, this time warning us about the connection between neglect of the blessings described above and the grave danger of apostasy (a subject he’s already treated in chapter 6). The warning here is couched against the backdrop of the old covenant, specifically passages such as Numbers 15:30, which reads, “*but the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.*” The author’s point is that there were specific sins under the old covenant for which there was no forgiveness—those done with a high hand, i.e., “willfully,” out of a spirit of rebellion. Likewise, a similar situation exists for those who have confessed Christ and have been baptized, but who never have trusted in Jesus’ death and priestly work to save them from themselves. The author warns his hearers in verse 26, “*for if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.*”

Since he’s already told us that Jesus can save us from whatever temptation may befall us, the situation described here is analogous to someone under the old covenant who sins willfully, for which he (or she) knows that there is no forgiveness under the sacrificial system. Such people openly mock God through their actions. That this is a reference to someone who has never been a believer is clear. That someone hearing this warning might worry it applies to them, proves by their worry that they are not the person depicted here. The person who deliberately sins in this manner is not afraid they are in sin, or that they have not truly believed the gospel. Like those in the old covenant who committed sin for which they knew there was no pardon, those who hear this warning and are not worried about it, are the people the author has in mind. Only those who are truly Christ’s will fear not being Christ’s!

The author tells us that those of whom is thinking have a knowledge of the truth (that is they have heard the gospel, but never believed it) and yet for them there are no saving benefits from Christ’s priestly work. Rather they have nothing “*but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.*” Once again, only a Christian will hear this warning and feel a sense of fear that the author might be speaking about them. Only a Christian worries about such things, and every Christian desires to make sure this does not apply to them. That said, the warning is to be heeded. Those who sin (given what the author has already said in Hebrews 6, I think the specific situation is the sin of apostasy) and attempt to justify it without repentance, or who just don’t care, ought to be afraid.

Again, the author turns to the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32, Isaiah 26—our Old Testament lesson this morning) to make his point about the gravity of apostasy. If, under the old covenant, anyone who blasphemed YHWH or worshiped other gods was subject to the death penalty, then how much greater is the covenant curse facing those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, but who then renounce him, willfully sinning without repentance or regret? In verses 28-30, the author spells out the consequences for such behavior. “*Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or*

three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." These are frightening words, and this is a warning to all of us about the gravity of the sin of apostasy.

The person depicted here by the author has already been described in chapter 3:12 as one who has "*an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.*" The reference is to someone who has never believed the gospel despite making a public profession of faith. These people are said to have an unbelieving heart, to trample the blood of Christ, to profane the covenant, and outrage the Holy Spirit. This is a person who mocks Christ's redemptive work by willfully renouncing Christ without repentance. This is someone who because of some external persecution or pressure has turned their back upon Christ's redemptive work after once professing faith in him. They give up on the new covenant and go back to the old, where there is no true sacrifice for sin—only the sacrifice of animals.

Because the author speaks of this person as "being sanctified," some have argued that this must be a reference to a Christian who actually loses their salvation. But there is a sense in which everyone who professes faith and is baptized is set apart ("sanctified") as a visible member of the covenant community—the church. Paul makes this very point in 1 Corinthians 7, when he speaks of an unbelieving spouse as "sanctified" by the believing spouse. The Reformed do not believe that true Christians (for whom Christ died) can fall away. Yet there are people within the covenant community, who can and do fall away—they are not of the elect, they have never trusted Christ, and they were never truly believers. As Jesus himself said, those who are truly his will persevere to the end of their lives in faith because Jesus himself ensures that they do (Matthew 24:13). But for those who mock God by renouncing Christ, the warning spelled out in verse 31. "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*"

The author concludes the section of his argument by asking this church to consider the wonderful things God has already done in their midst. In verses 32-33, he writes, "*but recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.*" Many in this church have suffered severe persecution because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. They have been enlightened just as the apostates in their midst were), but they endured despite their difficulties. They have already experienced public derision from pagans and Jews, they know affliction, and they have suffered together.

But they did not fall away and renounce Jesus. In fact, he says in verse 34, "*for you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.*" People in this church have demonstrated love for one another—having compassion on those who have been arrested. The authorities have pillaged their property and possessions, but they still persevered. Why? Because those who are Christ's and who look to their high priest have a better possession (their heavenly treasure), and they will abide (remain) in Christ no matter what happens, because the high priest lives to make intercession for his own. Those whom he has purchased (redeemed) will not fall away. Through his intercession on their behalf, he ensures that they persevere, and that they will receive their heavenly treasure.

Because of this confidence in Jesus Christ, in verse 35 the author exhorts the members of this struggling church, "*therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.*" It is rather remarkable to consider that this epistle was likely written before A.D. 70 and yet the author recites the words of Jesus as recorded in Luke 6:23—"rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is

great in heaven.”¹ This means that the unknown author of this epistle was well familiar with the memorized sayings of Jesus, if not with the gospel of Luke. His point is simply that these people have come so far and endured so much. Now is not the time to give up and return to the inferior, the types and shadows, to the old covenant. The only way to endure in times of loss, suffering, and persecution is to look to our great high priest Jesus Christ, not to our current circumstances.

In verse 36 he reminds them to be patient—their reward will come. *“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”* Those reading this epistle “do the will of God” by trusting in the great high priest who declares *“behold, I have come to do your will”* (Hebrews 10:9). In John 6:28-29, Jesus addresses this very point when he was asked, *“what must we do, to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’”* It is Jesus whose death redeems us, sanctifies us, and gives us an eternal redemption. And because he has, we do his will by trusting in him, and relying on his priestly work for us to endure to the end. The Christians reading this letter are to keep their eyes on the goal, trust in Christ, all the while knowing that God will give to them everything he has promised to them.

Returning to his familiar pattern, the author now cites from several Old Testament texts (Habakkuk 2:3 and Isaiah 26:20) to make his point to his Jewish readers. *“For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’”* These texts remind God’s persecuted people that the end will come in due time, that they must trust in God’s promise (the righteous live by faith), and shrinking back (removing oneself from the ecclesia so as to avoid persecution) will risk a more serious consequence than the persecution of the civil authorities—God’s wrath and anger.

The author concludes in verse 39 by reminding his headers/hearers of his great confidence in them. *“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”* The way out is not to give up, but to look to Christ (in faith) knowing that he will give us what he has promised, and that he will preserve our souls on the day of judgment, when all others are consumed. This is why we must persevere and this is why we are willing to endure whatever persecution and hardship comes our way. For Jesus is our great high priest. Our confidence is in him. So, let us draw near with full assurance.

What, then, do we take with us from this text?

Because we live in a time and place where we face virtually no persecution from the civil authorities, and few of us ever face any real or intense opposition to our Christian faith, it is easy to take the blessings the author describes here for granted. Yet, like the church receiving this letter, we find ourselves surrounded by paganism and false religion on every side. Our primary threat therefore is not persecution, but neglect and apathy. While few of us feel the pull toward the non-Christian religion in which we were raised (like those Jewish converts to Christianity felt the pull to go back to Judaism), all of us are threatened by our sinful propensity to grow so comfortable with our Christian faith that we take it for granted.

That is why the particular exhortations given us by the author of Hebrews are so important for us to hear and obey. Because of the priestly work of Jesus Christ, we have access to the throne of heaven.

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 271.

Therefore, “let us draw near to God” will full assurance. Because the priestly work of Jesus Christ has accomplished for us sanctification and an eternal and perfect redemption, let us hold fast to our confession. Let us know what we believe and why we believe it. And because of the priestly work of Jesus Christ, let us strive to love one another and stir-up in each other good works.

But let also take the author’s warning seriously about the danger of apostasy. Let us not sow the seeds of apostasy by neglecting to assemble together to hear God’s word, receive the sacraments, and enjoy the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us draw near, confess our faith, and do everything in our power to love one another as we urge each other on to good works. But the only way this will happen is if we keep our eyes and our focus upon our great high priest, who, through his once for all sacrifice for sin has already earned for us all the blessings he has promised to us. So in confidence and in full assurance, let us draw near to the throne of grace . . .