

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part eighteen

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GRACE AND HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST

Hebrews 4:14-16 - "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. [15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. [16] 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."

There are some attending dangers when studying right through a book of the Bible - especially a tightly packed and reasoned book like Hebrews. Because a study like this is carried out over many weeks it's easy to press forward in the text while not remembering past repeated ideas and themes. And there are some repeated themes that, even though studied weeks ago, continue to shed important light on future passages and studies.

This is the third time in twenty-eight verses our writer has urged his readers to *continue strongly pressing into the implications of their faith in Christ Jesus*:

Hebrews 3:6 - "...but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house *if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*"

Hebrews 3:14 - "For we have come to share in Christ, *if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*"

And today's text - **Hebrews 4:14** - "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, *let us hold fast our confession.*"

Our writer is like a big dog with a bone in this repeated concern. He won't let this idea slip away from our minds. Holding on to our confession isn't automated. It takes great concentration and educated trust and persistent effort. Today's text is unique in that our writer piles up *encouragements* to lift our hopes for success in "*holding fast*" our confidence in the Lord. God hasn't left us to our own resources in our perseverance in faith. That's what we're going to examine in today's teaching.

1) REPEATED CALLS TO HOLD FAST OUR CONFESSION IMPLY A CONSTANT OPPOSITION TO CONTINUANCE IN FAITH

If I tell you to *continue* doing what you're doing you would just keep doing it. But if I tell you to *brace yourself* and *hold on* in order to continue what you're doing you would understand there are forces working *against* your continuing. You would understand it isn't going to be *easy* or *automatic* to continue. You would *dig in* in *order* to continue.

That's the message of our text. "...*Let us hold fast our confession*" (14). The single Greek word - *krat-eh-o* - is most commonly translated "*to seize*." There's exertion in the word. There's strained muscle in it - like the way you hold on to your end of the rope in a tug-of-war.

This is so important. You wouldn't think, in a world like ours, it would even be *possible* to forget the energy and stamina following Christ demands. But the apostle Peter tells his Christian readers it is unreasonably common to move on from *initial conversion* to *ongoing life in Christ* with an *unprepared mind* as to what is involved in *continuing* in the faith:

1 Peter 4:12-13 - "Beloved, *do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

Did you see it? Peter has this gentle rebuke for Christians who seemed genuinely confused and surprised that something as wonderful as gospel faith would encounter so much hatred and suffering and ridicule and persecution. These Christians hadn't formed any categories of thought to *expect* a tough road - or in the words of Jesus - a *narrow, hard gate*.

So, according to the words of Peter, and according to our text in Hebrews, the one thing a disciple must *never* say when there is nothing but trouble pressing in from every direction is, "*Boy, I never dreamed things would be like this with Jesus*"

Christ at the center of my life!

To that comment the entire New Testament would say, ***“Well, what in the world were you thinking? How could you possibly be surprised by this? Why weren’t you expecting this? A servant isn’t greater than his master. If they hated Jesus, of course they’ll hate you. Give your head a New Testament shake!”***

But there is something far more glorious and promising than mere warning in this text.

2) **THERE IS DIVINE HELP FOR BOTH OUR SENSE OF INWARD UNWORTHINESS AND THE ACTUAL IMPERFECTIONS OF OUR OWN OBEDIENCE**

Hebrews 4:14-15 - ***“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. [15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”***

See the ways of God in His Word. I love the balance of warning and promise - seriousness and hope. We need to capture this divine method in the teaching ministry of the church.

Our writer moves from serious ***warning*** to pressing ***encouragement*** into our minds. We all carry around our ***unworthy selves***. We know the difference between the purity of heart we long for and, what Peter calls the inward struggle with ***“...the passions of the flesh that war against your soul”*** (1 Peter 2:11).

Peter knew the weight of that ***unworthiness*** when following his Lord. All honest disciples know what was going on in Peter’s heart when he saw the miraculous catch of fish and said ***this*** to Jesus - ***“...Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord”*** (Luke 5:8).

We all ***know*** Peter’s words inside our own skins. Our faith is not always steady. Our progress in striving against sin is uneven. Even the things we ***do*** in devotion to the Lord seem tainted and unable to stand on their own merit. Our very best efforts need so much divine grace. How shall people like we ***“...hold fast our confession?”*** On what foundation can our ***confidence*** stand?

This is the haunting issue our writer unpacks in these verses. And the important point to notice is, quite surprisingly, he doesn’t point us directly to the ***cross*** where our ***forgiveness*** was purchased. He points us ***post-cross*** - ***after*** the event of the crucifixion - to that time the disciples saw Jesus as He ***“passed through the heavens”*** (14). He points his readers to our Lord’s ***ascension***.

And there’s a reason for that. We are too quickly inclined to think of the work of Christ on our behalf as being ***“finished”*** at the cross. And it ***is*** finished in the sense that there is no other sacrifice remaining for our pardon. But while that atoning work is ***finished*** it is also ***ongoing***. And our writer is telling us our ***perception*** and ***consideration*** of the ***kind*** of High Priest we currently have is the chief cornerstone of our ongoing strength and confidence before such a holy God.

It’s one thing to know the record of your ***past sins has been forgiven***. It’s another thing to ***hold on to grace in the face of present unworthiness and struggle***. And our writer is telling us those who lose hope or cast away confidence do so from not appreciating the nature of their High Priest, Jesus, the Christ:

Hebrews 4:15 - ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”***

Notice how this verse begins with the negative - ***“We do not have....”*** There is a certain kind of high priest that we do ***not*** have. What kind is that? We do ***not*** have an ***unsympathetic*** high priest.

There were many such priests in the Old Testament - **1 Samuel 2:12-17** - ***“Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. [13] The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest’s servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, [14] and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. [15] Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest’s***

servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." [16] And if the man said to him, 'Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish,' he would say, 'No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force.' [17] Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt."

There are many such imperfect priests in the Old Testament. They cared more for themselves than the people. They served with impure motives. They were so weak in their flesh they couldn't remain faithful in their tasks. God's people were surrounded with *imperfect priests* and suffered greatly for it.

This is what our writer of Hebrews is getting at in that *fifteenth verse* when he starts out telling us what kind of high priest we **do not** have - "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses....**"

We do not have a high priest who *forgets* to put us first and himself second. We do not have a high priest with corruptible motives. We do not have a high priest with a personal agenda. We do not have a high priest who forgets why he's there. We do not have a high priest who forgets about the weak and failing and discouraged. We do not have a high priest who has any hesitation whatsoever to constantly offer sympathy and help.

And the primary reason for our encouragement is the mysterious *incarnational nature of our High Priest* - **Hebrews 4:15** - "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.**"

We have a *divine, perfectly sinless, fully human and unforgettably sympathetic* high priest. And He brings these unique qualifications into His priestly work on our behalf. We've looked at this idea fully when we were studying *Hebrews chapter two* but I want to open it up again.

Think again about what is going on when Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection:

Luke 24:36-39 - "As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, 'Peace to you!' [37] But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. [38] And he said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? [39] See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

Notice those words, "Touch me and see" (39). *Touch* and *see* don't seem to go together. You don't have to touch something in order to see it. **Question** - What were they going to *see* by *touching* that they couldn't see *without* touching? **Answer** - The risen Christ - their *soon to be ascended High Priest* - was still a *man*. He had a body that was, like theirs - at least in this sense - still *physical and material*. As they *touched* Him they would have a deeper sense that He was still *one of them*.

This is a warm, living truth - not a cold theological one. Let me ask you this question about your own spiritual failures. And think it through very deeply and honestly. **When you go to the Lord with your sin - especially when you have sinned yet again - how do you picture the divine response?**

Do you see a perfectly holy God gradually getting impatient with your lack of spiritual progress? Do you picture a stern pardon, but granted with somewhat fading patience?

Or do you see something like this. Do you confess your sin to the Lord - your faithful High Priest - and picture Him saying something like this: **"I remember what it was like to be tempted just like that. I remember those forty days in the wilderness and that confrontation with the devil. It was a very hard time. And while I never gave in, I get where you're coming from with your sin."**

While never patient with *hidden* sin, our *sympathetic* High Priest always feels *with* us in our repentance. Never *against* us. This is the encouragement our writer is holding up before us in this great text.

3) **FOR EVERY DISCIPLE THERE WILL COME OCCASIONS WHEN WE STAND IN NEED OF DEEPER HELP**

Hebrews 4:16 - "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."

Mark those words, *"...in time of need."* They mark a **distinction** in seasons and circumstances. They **differentiate** our normal daily need of divine grace - those times when every moment of every day, where we constantly require divine grace and favor - from **other** situations - other times that can only be described as times of **desperate need**.

We need to consider those times. They're different from the other times I used to sing about in church - **"I need Thee every hour."** That's absolutely true, but it's not what our text is referring to. We **do** need grace every hour. But there are also **"times of need."**

- a) **There are times of persecution.** That is the specific situation giving birth to this letter to the Hebrews. Our writer addresses Christians not long out of Judaism. Their choice to stand for Christ is not going unchallenged. There is tremendous pressure to conform to their previous culture. A stand for Christ was not tolerated.

This was a **time of need**. Some of the circumstances are described in **Hebrews 10:32-36** - **"But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, [33] sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. [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. [35] Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. [36] For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."**

There are moments that awaken your awareness that your faithfulness to the Lordship and values of Christ aren't going to be tolerated by the surrounding culture. These are times of special need. It takes no special grace at all to **closet your faith**. And it takes no special grace at all to **modify the aspects of discipleship that don't fit the values of the culture**. These are the two common **grace-less** responses of much of the contemporary church.

There's another response to this **time of need**. You can go again in earnest to your high priest who **remained faithful**. He was mocked and slandered. He was lied about and ridiculed. They **spat** on Jesus. And He never gave up on you. He was committed to your redemption when everyone else was against it. He knows what it's like to remain **visibly committed** to a culturally despised mission. Go to Him in your time of need.

- b) **There are times of temptation.** Sin is always at the door, true enough. But there are times especially inviting to unchristian attitudes and responses. There are times when others have been noticed and appreciated and we have not. There are times when material needs make the setting the heart on material gain feel more justifiable. There are times when being mistreated by others when we felt we least deserved it make the harboring of anger feel righteous and just.

These are some of the most urgent **"times of need."** Our own judgment, unaided by much divine grace, will not be adequate to see things as they really are. These are the times when we are most apt to justify giving in to sin.

- c) **There are times of suffering.** Without special grace we will find it hard to see any profit in our pain. Only by staying extremely close to our Lord will we look at our persistent suffering with a higher understanding. We need help in this:

2 Corinthians 12:7-9 - **"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."**

Notice the reference to the Lord's **great grace** as Paul approached the throne of God for help with this persistent need - **"My grace is sufficient for you...."** The transition in Paul is striking. The move from **asking for relief** to **boasting in his weakness** is huge. Such is the help from the throne of grace.

- d) **There can come those most dangerous times of all to the soul - those times when you can't make yourself care.**

There come moments that can be destiny shaping. There come moments where, without divine help, we can turn in the opposite direction to the throne of grace. And the only other direction is pretending everything is fine. Only the throne of grace can undo this knot of self-deception.

1 Corinthians 10:12 - "Therefore let anyone who *thinks that he stands* take heed *lest he fall.*"

There is an element of *self-confrontation* in this time of deep need. There is self-humbling - sometimes before brothers and sisters in Christ. But this is the only path to the promise of help at the throne of grace. Helping grace almost always hurts in its first touch. That's because it almost always has to surgically remove embedded sin.

4) **IN YOUR DEEPEST NEED ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU'RE COMING TO A THRONE**

Hebrews 4:16 - "Let us then with confidence draw near *to the throne of grace...*"

We need this reminder divine grace is more than just *pity*. It's more than just *forgiveness*. Divine grace carries the provision of divine power and authority. It recreates. It launches new beginnings. It protects.

Come boldly because nothing can stand against God's grace in your time of need.