

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

05-80

Dear Reader

Sometimes a verse that has been read perhaps a hundred times suddenly has more meaning than ever before. As I was preparing to discuss it in my Sunday School class, Hebrews 4:16 was such a verse. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." I want to share with you some of my thoughts that, I trust, the Lord brought to my mind.

Hebrews is a book of contrasts, written to Hebrew Christians who throughout most their lives had only Judaism as their religion, with its forms and ceremonies. Perhaps it can be said that *Hebrews* main theme is to contrast that which was "good" (Judaism) with that which is "better" (Christianity) or even "the best" because nothing will ever be better than Christianity. In the immediate context of our verse, we have mentioned *Christ*, our great high priest, who has "passed through the heavens" and can sympathize with our infirmities or weaknesses because He was tested as we are tested, but with Him, "sin apart" (JND). To understand all this we need to turn to the Tabernacle System of the Old Testament.

The Tabernacle System

Imagine yourself 3500 years ago in a jet flying high over the bleak sands of the wilderness near Mount Sinai, just east of the Red Sea. There, far below, you see a little rectangle with hundreds of thousands of tents grouped around the rectangle in an orderly manner. There also would be the need for considerable room for cattle, so the total area must have been much the same as a large city today. These were the children of Israel who had just left Egypt, with a journey of 250 or so miles (about 400 km) between them and the Promised Land of Canaan.

Actually, you couldn't see all this from a plane, for a mysterious cloud covered the camp (Nu.9:15-22; Ps.105:39). This cloud was God's provision to protect these 2-3 million people and countless

animals from the blistering sun in an otherwise cloudless sky.

Let's in our imagination parachute into that huge camp. As we approach the ground we see the little rectangle is actually a fenced-off area which houses a little building from which the mysterious cloud begins as a pillar of cloud. There is also a large "bowl" of water (called the laver) and an altar with fire continually burning, on which animals are offered as sacrifice. We quickly learn upon landing that we are not to approach this "tabernacle" for, unless you are ones appointed by God, to approach means death (Nu.1:53; 3:10). The tents of most of the people had to be "some distance from" or "afar off" from the Tabernacle (Nu.2:2). Certain sacrifices could be brought to one end of the Tabernacle and all of Israel could meet in that area (Nu.10:3) if called by God.

While many were appointed by God to serve the Tabernacle, only the sons of Aaron (the high priest) could actually enter the building. They were the priests. And they could not enter a little room at the far end of the building, called the "holy of holies" or "the holiest of all." But, after certain ceremonies of cleansing, they could go into the first part of the building and perform certain services.

Besides Moses who evidently could talk with God at any time, only the high priest, Aaron, could enter the holy of holies, and that only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev.16), after an elaborate ceremony, and only with blood which he was to sprinkle once on the throne of God and seven times before it on the ground (Lev.16:4-15). The ark with its golden cover, with two cherubim bowed above it, was the throne of God. God said to Moses, "There I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony" (Ex.25:22).

Meanings

Several things come to mind from this account. First, God wanted his people, recently redeemed from Egypt (picturing the bondage of the world-system) by crossing the Red Sea (Christ dying for us) to gather to and around Himself. God dwelt in the midst of His people! God also wanted to dwell with Adam and Eve (Gen.3:8), but their sin spoiled their fellowship together. And from the New Testament, we learn that “where two or three are gathered to My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt.18:20). And as we are given a brief look into the eternity to come, God says, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and He will *dwell with them* and they shall be His people. God Himself shall be with them and be their God” (Rev.21:3).

But we also learn that God was far off for most of the people. As close as they could get was near to the altar of burnt offering just inside the front curtain-gate of the Tabernacle, if they had a sacrifice. They couldn't even offer the sacrifice: it was turned over to the priests for that work. Even Aaron's sons, the priests, could only get close to God's throne, for an elaborate curtain blocked them from entrance, lest they died. God's “shining forth” (Ps.80:1) might have been visible, either backlighting the curtain or shining around its edges. It all said, “Keep out”!

The High Priest could go into God's presence once a year with blood and incense, but it must have been a fearsome thing. Secular accounts claim that a rope was tied to one leg so if he died, he could be hauled out. But the blood on the throne was enough for God: it really made it a mercy seat instead of a judgment seat, and God could go on with Israel for another year. Remember, the 250-300 mile journey took them 40 years because God wouldn't let the generation that refused to enter the Promised Land after a comparatively short journey, go in later (Lev.13-14). So the high priest must have gone into the holiest of all 40 times during Israel's wilderness wanderings.

1500 Years Later: Christ

The Tabernacle-Law system was “a *shadow* of the good things to come” (Heb.10:1). “It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb.10:4). God “takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will,

we have been sanctified [set apart] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb.10:9-10). “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us *through the veil*, that is, His flesh” (Heb.10:19-20).

We know the veil of Herod's temple was torn from top to bottom by divine power upon Christ's death. Of course, there was no throne of God behind *that* veil, yet it still symbolized distance between God and man. Although secular reports state the temple veil was about 6 inches (150 mm) thick and far too tall to be reached, God tore it open from the top to the bottom. That act certainly showed the emptiness of Judaism in Christ's day because there was nothing behind that curtain, but it also surely showed there was no longer a hindrance that said “keep out.” But our verse just above speaks of entering the Holiest *through* the veil which pictured our Lord's flesh, His giving Himself in bearing our sins in His own body on the tree (1 Pet.2:24). His flesh, given for us, satisfying God, is no longer a hindrance, but an *invitation* to come before Him.

The Greek noun for *boldness* both in Hebrews 4:16 and above in 10:19 is *parrhesia* and denotes unreservedness in speech, the absence of fear in speaking boldly, hence, confidence (Vines Dictionary). So the thought is that we can come in prayer anytime, spiritually right into God's presence, without fear to tell Him all our innermost needs and fears, and ask His help to meet the needs of our hearts. We thus know He hears us. Of course, we don't come to some physical, earthly throne, for our High Priest, has passed through the heavens and now shares the Father's throne in heaven (Acts 2:32-36; Rev.3:21).

But They Were All Priests

If the inner veil between the holy place and the Holiest had not existed in Tabernacle days, the regular priests would have had access directly to God's throne, although it would have been an awe-inspiring, fearful sight. But the common people of Israel, the “laity” as the so-called common people of God are called today, were still left outside, a long way off. Where does that leave us? We are not sons of Aaron.

The marvelous truth is that every Christian, male, female, child, is doubly a priest! We are a “kingdom of priests” (Rev.1:6, Scofield KJV) or “a kingdom, priests ...” (JND). 1 Peter 2:5 first says we are a “*holy priesthood*, to offer up *spiritual sacrifices* acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” This speaks of worship, as it were, bringing our thoughts of Christ before God. It speaks too of praise, perhaps a more general term, but perhaps having a little more of the thought of what Christ has done, His great work on our behalf, so acceptable to God that we are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph.1:6). “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name” (Heb.13:15).

1 Peter 2:9 goes on to tell us that we are a “*royal* [or, kingly] *priesthood*, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may *proclaim* the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” This has the thought of telling others of Christ and what He has done. It is not the job of some clergyman, for there is no high/low order of Christian in Christianity. We all are equally priests. We all equally have boldness to come to the throne of God and pour out our worship, praise, thanksgiving, and needs. We will find *grace* (undeserved favor) there. Don’t ever let yourself be put into the Old Testament position of having in practice few spiritual privileges, of a laity, far from God. Lay hold of and enjoy your New Testament position of coming boldly before the throne of grace.

Preparation to Come

This doesn’t mean that we come *carelessly* before God. There still is, figuratively, the Altar of Burnt Offering and the Laver. We come in the appreciation of what Christ means to God. The Burnt offering was what was sweet to, and accepted by God. The sin- and trespass-offerings spoke of confession of sins. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn.1:9). So we come as believers with confessed sins and as purged worshipers (Heb.1:3; 10:1-2). Then there is the Laver. As true believers we *are* “washed from our sins in His blood” (Rev.1:5). 1 Corinthians 6:11 tells us the same thing. But there is daily

defilement for which we need cleansing by “the washing of water by the Word” (Eph.5:26). As the very true old saying goes, the Bible will keep one from sin, or sin will keep one from the Bible.

Also, one would figuratively pass the lampstand. Christ is the light for His people (Jn.1:9; 8:12; 1 Jn.1:5; Rev.21:23-24). On the other side was the Table of Showbread which spoke of Christ as food for His people (Jn.6:32-33). It also has a thought of proper fellowship with others. The early believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and prayers” (Acts 2:42). Wouldn’t wrong fellowship hinder our communion with God? Lastly was the Altar of Incense which speaks of worship, which we have already discussed. We might say more, but this is enough.

Our Spiritual Blessings

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every *spiritual* blessing in the heavenly places [or, heavenlies] in Christ” (Eph.1:3). Although some spiritual blessing could be found in virtually every chapter of the New Testament, we’ll confine ourselves to those mentioned in the first two chapters of Ephesians. We see in verse 3 that the Father is the Source of every blessing. See James 1:17.

We are *chosen by God the Father in Christ*, and that took place before the foundations of the world were laid, with the object that we be holy and without blame before Him in love (v.4). We as unique individual believers are not products of chance, but of divine design and choice!

We are *predestined to adoption as sons* by Jesus Christ to Himself (v.5). This goes beyond election to salvation, above, to being marked out beforehand (predestination) to the placement (adoption) as *sons* in God’s family – the place of highest privilege!

We are *accepted in the Beloved* (v.6). We were so far from God. We were sinners by nature and even now sin, but God sees *Christ* when He looks at us, and so we know we are accepted by God.

We are *redeemed* – bought back to God through Christ’s blood. Our sins are forgiven, past, present

and future! It's *His* grace, *His* favor to us, although undeserved, that makes it all possible (v.7). The bounty of His grace towards us is without measure.

We have been shown the *mystery* (secret until revealed) of *God's will* that eventually Christ will gather together in one, all things in heaven and earth (vv.8-10). He will reign and we with Him for 1000 years (Rev.20:4,6).

We have obtained *an inheritance* (v.11).

Upon believing we were *sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise*, who is the Guarantee of our future inheritance (vv.13-14). He indwells us; He seals us as a mark of ownership and protection.

God gave Christ to be Head over all things *to* the Church which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (vv.22-23). Yes, He is also Head of the Church, but as His future bride, reigning with Him, all that He is head over is for His Church. We believers are part of that Church, itself a wonderful spiritual blessing. So is it a great blessing to reign with Him, although that will be a physical reality.

We have been made *spiritually alive*, who were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, through His great love to us (2:1-4)!

We have been raised up together and made to sit, spiritually, in the heavenlies – a heavenly position – in Christ that will have its greatest fulfillment in the future (2:5-7).

Our salvation is by pure grace, not of works, but of His workmanship, a *new creation* spiritually in Christ Jesus with the object of works that will honor Christ (2:8-10). We in so many ways are different people from what we once were! So, positionally, we are no longer in the realm of the flesh, but in *Christ Jesus*, that resurrected and glorified Man.

Think also of our priesthood previously discussed. Think of our privilege to come boldly to the throne of grace! Think of the Rapture, to be instantly taken to the Father's house! I'm sure you can think of many more.

Our High Priest Tested

Before concluding I want to speak of our High Priest (Christ) *tested* while here on earth. The Greek word can be translated as tempt, try or test. We need to be careful of our thoughts here in Hebrews 4:15 and elsewhere when thinking of our Lord being "tempted" as translated in most translations. In our thoughts *tempt* indicates a *tendency* to do wrong even if no wrong occurs. "I'm so angry at you that I'm *tempted* to hit you, but don't want an assault charge with the police." From his viewpoint Satan tempted the Lord, but from the Lord's viewpoint it was only a test because there was no tendency on the Lord's part to take Satan up on his attempted temptation. Eve was tempted to sin, and she did. As to Christ, the test only proved He could not sin. Yet the Lord was true man and thus saw and heard the same things we see and hear. So He can sympathize with our weaknesses and help us as we pour out our needs before the throne of grace.

Concluding Remarks

Aren't you glad you live in New Testament times? Although many of the children of Israel were "saved" people (as we would say today), they had so very few spiritual blessings. They certainly had no personal intimacy with God. They often saw the *results* of Him working, but could never draw near to Himself except on rare occasions involving a handful of people. All they had were shadows. We trust this article has made Hebrews 4:16 have much more meaning for you and that you will never allow Satan to rob you of your spiritual blessings.

We certainly appreciate Randy Stephenson for keeping us going on www.inthebeloved.org.

For more detail on the Tabernacle, you might like to read my book, *The Tabernacle Talks Today*, (Believers Bookshelf). See bbusa.org and bbcan.org.

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