

Thoughts on the Epistle to the Hebrews

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The first two chapters give light as to the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is especially presented as the antitype of the Ark of the Testimony.

In chapter one emphasis is laid upon His deity. There the pure gold shines before us in verse after verse. The second chapter just as clearly speaks of His true humanity — the shittim wood. In Him as the true Ark of the testimony God has been fully declared, thus we read, "God has spoken to us in . . . Son."

That God might be revealed and men be brought into the good of the revelation the Son took Manhood and went down into death. By His death He defeated the Devil; met the holy claims of God and secured a company of many sons — His brethren, the sanctified ones — the Assembly, in the midst of which He has taken His place as Leader. He conducts them, in His own company, into the presence of God, leading their willing hearted praise.

Hebrews 3 to 9 open out to us the truth of the Priesthood of our Lord and His better sacrifice.

He is variously presented as Wilderness, Sanctuary, and Melchisedec Priest. The heavenly calling — better far than any earthly blessing — demands "such an High Priest" as He is. This calling, with its available helps for the partakers is here opened out to faith. How the appreciative saint revels in the preciousness of the Word of God and in the Priestly grace of our glorified Lord. All is grounded on the imperishable basis of *His* "better sacrifice" who "through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God."

Passing into the tenth chapter we are invited to avail ourselves of the blessed privilege of entering through the veil into the presence of God. Such is the holy boldness and fitness afforded by Christ's death that we find ourselves at home with God, needing and asking nothing. What a region of satisfied desire to be before Him with something to give to Him! So would we function as purged worshippers, having freely received we would freely give. With hearts entranced by Christ and in the enjoyment of His glory and grace we would wave Him, in Spirit formed appreciation, before God for the satisfying of His heart.

"The glories of His work we bring —
Thee glorified we see;
His deep perfections gladly sing,
And tell them forth to Thee."

Hebrews 11 illustrates most wonderfully the principle that "the just shall live by faith." Here we learn what faith in God leads the believer to do for God. It has been truly said, "Faith believes the incredible; sees the invisible; and does the impossible." The first seven verses are basic. The quality of faith is attested. In the case of Abel we learnt that approach to God is on the ground of sacrifice. Faith recognises that life is forfeit by sin and comes to God through the death of another. Enoch demonstrates that the man of faith cannot be at home in a world where sin is dominant. He walked with God. Such a walk could have but one end — glory; God translated him. Suggestively, he prefigures the translation of the Assembly to heaven before the storm of the great tribulation. Noah is a figure of the godly remnant of Israel, not kept from the tribulation but saved through it. Verses 8 to 20 give seven instances

of Faith's Confession or Witness. Verses 23 to 31 give seven instances of Faith's Conversation or Walk. Verses 32 to 34 name seven who illustrate Faith's Conflict or Warfare. These are followed by the unnamed women and "others". Of all such the divine testimony is, "of whom the world was not worthy," and "these all . . . obtained a good report through faith."

All that we have so briefly viewed in the divine gallery of faith emphasizes that the heavenly calling is "better" than the earthly calling in which all these worthies had their part. The saints of this day of grace are given precedence over all the Old Testament saints, for they cannot come into their promised portion until we, "the many sons," are brought to glory.

That grace which, in Hebrews 10, leads into the holiest of all, and calls into the path of faith — so blessedly illustrated in Hebrews 11, brings us under the discipline of the school of God in the next chapter. If we would know the blessedness of the presence of God, if we would be morally fitted for our place in His testimony now or in the world to come, we shall need His schooling. Growth in the knowledge of God, serviceability now, fitness for the reigning time, all are promoted by chastisement, the child-training of God. How many and blessed are the lessons learned in the testing circumstances of every day as the saint goes through them with the conscious knowledge of being under His hand. A true estimate of self; practical partaking of the holiness of God; the value of the support of the priestly grace of Christ; these are some of the lessons to be learned in the school of God. A deepened appreciation of the things "we are come to" is also possible for us. We are not under the law with its bondage and fear, we have come to "Mount Zion" which speaks of the sovereign choice and love of God (Psalm 78: 68). We are come to the vessel of God's administration "Heavenly Jerusalem," the metropolis of the coming universe of bliss and glory. We are come to the gathering of the angels, for "unto the angels hath He not put into subjection the world to come, whereof we speak."

We are come to the Assembly of the Firstborn (ones) enregistered in heaven. The Firstborn is a designation of rank and dignity. Just as our blessed Lord, as Firstborn, takes the chief place in regard to all creation, so His Assembly takes the chief place of blessing and glory in relation to all the companies of saints from the different days of God's dealings — each with its own distinctive testimony. We are come to God, the Judge of all, for all in the world to come will be subject to Him. His will shall be supreme. His administration shall be universally recognised and acclaimed, and we are now come to Him. He is our God. We are come to the spirits of just men made perfect. The spirits of all the pre-church saints are blest indeed. They are now in the good of the finished work of Christ. Redemption's work has been done, they know the righteousness of their blessing and attribute it to the death of Christ. Yet still they await the consummation of blessing. Perfect as to their spirits the just men are waiting for that moment when the power of God's salvation shall touch their bodies at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are come to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant. In the spirit of that Covenant we are blest now. We have received everlasting mercy from His hands. Those hands that shall dispense world-wide blessing in the day of His Kingdom have been stretched out to us and that mercy flows righteously through the blood of sprinkling. Assuredly it speaks better things than that of Abel which cried for vengeance.

The knowledge of all this that we have come to, in coming to Christ, is well calculated to spur us on to full response to God, in the enjoyment of our heavenly calling.

The last chapter of our epistle teaches us that the features of the heavenly calling have ample scope for manifestation in the practical circumstances of everyday life.

1. In the continuance of brotherly love. Passing as we are through a cold and hateful world how comforting it is to experience, as we so often do, the love of the brethren. May we increasingly

contribute to it.

2. In the grace of hospitality opening our homes for the good of others. The opened heart opens the home — "Come into my house" (Acts 16: 15). Fidelity and holiness are essential there, with bowels of kindness.

3. In having a heart for prisoners. Maybe we do not know any personally, but we have all heard in our day of those who have been incarcerated in communist prisons. Shut away from fellowship, deprived of every visible reminder of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, how ruthlessly and cruelly have they been oppressed in an endeavour to break their spirits and to wrest them from the faith. Who knows but what many are now suffering similarly. May we enter, feelingly, into their circumstances and lift up our hearts to God in fervent prayer on their behalf. May we have sympathetic concern for those who suffer any adversity. May we feel deeply for such with feelings borne of practical experience as being ourselves in the body — that is to say, as being in the responsible condition in which we have the opportunity of learning for ourselves the compassions of God and so much so that we can extend to our suffering brethren the comfort which we ourselves have received. Surely we are not above or impervious to the trials of our brethren! If we are we have never been in the sanctuary.

The priesthood of believers is not named in our epistle but Christ is named as the High Priest of our confession. We are His associates. Invited, as we are in chapter 10 to draw near into the holiest of all, it is that we might exercise ourselves in the highest priestly service — the worship of God. Thus in the first ten chapters of Hebrews we are moving in, step by step, to be at home in the presence of God as purged worshippers. From thence we are moving out, in the power that His presence imparts, fraught with holy sensibilities which we have acquired in the holiest of all as we have companied with the Great Priest over the House of God. Thus we move out into the circle of fellowship and into the sphere of testimony. May we know more of the power of communion with that One who, while He is Minister of the Holy Places, feels for His own who are where the pressure is, and so ministers to them as to lift their hearts into His own company above the pressure. How great then is our privilege in exercising priestly sympathy towards our suffering brethren!

4. Another practical attendant of the heavenly calling is the maintenance of holiness in the marriage bond — and how great the need, in this day of increasing moral laxity, that the believing husband and wife should comport themselves as before God for His glory.

5. Also in living without the love of money — content, with this confidence, He has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Let us, in whatever circumstance, abide with Him, and we shall be "more than conquerors through Him that loved us."

Then we are exhorted, "*Remember* your leaders . . . imitate their *faith*." Do not imitate their methods, but do imitate their faith. What made them useful in their service; what constituted them leaders worth following, was their faith in God and their unreserved obedience to the Word of God. Consider the issue of their manner of life, they ever pointed to Christ. Their lives were coloured by their communion with Him. Whoever noticed them turned to Christ, just as did those two disciples who heard John Baptist speak, "they followed Jesus."

To those who lead; speak the Word of God and with all your speaking *live* it. Yours is a privileged position but a solemnly responsible one too. To "rule" is to lead in the way that is right. In this you follow your Lord for He leads in the way of righteousness (see Psalm 23 and Proverbs 8). To lead in the way is to exemplify in your practical life those things which you enjoin upon your brethren. How sad if, stumbled by your example, they despise your precept. Rather give them cause to value your doctrine through the appreciation your practical obedience engenders.

But leaders come and leaders go! We all have cause to remember such with thankfulness and if they have led aright they will have led us into this confidence, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever."

There are doctrines of grace, centring in Him who is the Centre of the heavenly calling, which *establish* the soul. Here is permanence and stability — Judaism with its enslaving legality is effete. That earthly calling is superseded. We have a fellowship identifying us with the altar where God's claims have all been met and where He finds His satisfaction and pleasure. It lies outside of the corruptions of men. It has Jesus Christ as its gathering centre. "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." He is outside all that is not of God. He is outside the Jewish order of carnal religion. He, "suffered without the gate." Our place is outside the camp with Him. If it was imperative for those from among the Jews who had trusted Christ to leave that order of things, originally constituted of God, corrupted by the Jews — "where also our Lord was crucified," how much more so for us to separate from that which God never established — the sects and systems of Christendom! Jesus shed His blood not only to deliver from judgment as did the blood of the passover lamb in Egypt, but to set us apart to God for His pleasure and service. We have nothing abiding here — our hope is in the world to come, "whereof we speak."

Let us then, with all this light and blessing, be a praising people. In every step of our way, whatever the circumstances, let us offer our spiritual sacrifices to God. May we be a thanksgiving people, doing good to all, and thus give pleasure to our God.

"Obey them that have the rule over you," or rather, "obey your leaders." They — salutary thought — are accountable to God for their stewardship amongst the saints. "Pray" — how readily we criticise. How often do we pray? These servants sought the prayers of their brethren in all their service, with all good conscience.

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will . . ."

God grant that we may reap the gain of this epistle's teaching and be such as those who heed the injunction, "Leaving the word of the beginning of the Christ, let us go on to what belongs to full growth."