

Our Great High Priest

IV. - That We May Find Grace

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities [weakness], that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities [weaknesses], in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Christians everywhere suffer today, as Paul suffered, in weaknesses and distress; in devastating experiences that are the lot of all who dwell upon this bastion of satanic evil—the earth. And the Lord does not seem always to deliver, no matter what the religious exercises and practices with which people hope to win His favor. Often the most devout believers go through the most devastating of circumstances. There seems no direct relationship between the faith and devotion of the believer and the deliverance from devastating circumstances. Sometimes those that seem to have very little piety or commitment, are delivered in miraculous ways.

So what is the answer? Is God indifferent to the sufferings of the saints? Is He saying to us—“I am not interested in your earthly distresses; I am only interested in your spiritual growth?” What is it, in fact, that He has really promised us? The truth of the matter is that He has promised us, not deliverance from all our difficulties, but the grace to handle them. And so the passage we have just read.

What is Paul really saying here? He is saying that Satan had attached a messenger to him—probably a demonic presence—who gave himself to the task of constant aggravation. It was not fatal stabs, but constantly irritating thorns. It was not a swift deathblow, but the daily misery of a thousand pricking thorns. Satan wanted Paul to suffer and he wanted him to suffer to such a point that he would cry out in despair, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Job of the Old Testament has been the symbol of wretchedness throughout the centuries. Job’s wife wanted him to “curse God and die.” And that, of course, was what Satan wanted. Later, God told Job that it was a test Satan had thrown down the gauntlet—does Job serve you for naught? Look what blessings you have given him. God had said—“Take away the blessings and he will still believe.” Satan then proceeded to strip Job of everything and still he remained grateful to God. His life on the earth was a “sea of troubles.” Satan wanted to “wear him down” and cause him to give up the conflict. It was at this point that he cried out to God for deliverance. But God’s response to Him was to offer him grace instead of deliverance. That may seem a poor substitute, and to some, a “cop out,” instead of a “bail out.” But let all take heed, who assume that the believer who has enough faith, will be delivered from every distressing

circumstance. Such a concept is quite contrary to the entire history of redemption. Nor was it the common experience of God's greatest messengers throughout the scripture. In fact, in Hebrews 11, the great hall of fame, it is clearly stated that some of God's "heroes" did not even accept deliverance, looking for the spiritual realities of their ultimate destiny with God.

So what then is the advantage of the believer? If there are no guarantees about personal welfare on the earth, are we any better off than the unbeliever? The answer, of course, is a resounding yes, certainly! As far as God's ultimate purpose for us is concerned we are destined to spend eternity with Him, sharing His glory. As the Scripture clearly points out, this is worth the brief span of suffering on the earth. As Paul points out to the Corinthians believers, "*Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal*" (II Corinthians 4:17,18).

To the Romans Paul said, "*Tribulation [affliction] worketh patience; patience, experience [approval] and approval, hope [expectation]; and hope does not make ashamed [leave without strength]; because the love of God is shed [poured out] in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which is given to us . . .*" (5:4,5). It is quite clear that affliction in this life has its important function. It is not clear precisely just how that works. But, however it may be, there is the work of grace going on in the heart of every believer and affliction has a key part in it. The assumption that every affliction must be swept away on the basis of human petitions, is absurd. James says, "*Let patience have her perfect [fulfilling] work.*"

Given the fact that meaningful and fulfilling afflictions do attend the believer on earth, what then may we expect from God? Can we reasonably assume that He will always sweep away the afflictions, simply because they do not suit us? Obviously not. The "thorn in the flesh" will be removed only when and if God elects. Paul, who might be regarded as a symbol of communion between man and God, was unsuccessful in getting the thorn removed.

So what then may we expect? We may expect "grace for a timely help." And what does that mean? It means that the afflictions which God allows to come to us, will be accompanied by His grace to bear them. And that grace will be sufficient. He does not promise blanket deliverance, but He does promise blanket strength. Nor does He give a "body of grace" within us to handle all necessities. He gives grace as the need arises. He does not give a reservoir of grace within us from which to draw from time to time, but rather immerses us in a river of grace as a ceaseless supply. We are thus never independent of Him. The Psalmist said—"When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." He did not say, "When my heart is overwhelmed, take away my troubles." There is nothing wrong in asking that troubles be removed—but, as Jesus prayed, "Not my will but thine be done." God will deliver when He is ready to deliver and not when we have generated some prescribed measure of human feelings of confidence.

There comes a point when we must let go of our reliance upon our religious experience and exercise and merit, as a condition of the work of Christ in our lives. The essential teaching of the book of Hebrews and of the New Testament

and of the Bible as a whole is that the Spirit of Christ has come to take the possession of all who will, and function within them to accomplish His purpose. The author of Hebrews makes this plain in (13:20,21) *“The God of peace . . . make you perfect [mend, restore] in every good thing, to do His will, working in you that which is well pleasing in His sight.”* And this is akin to Paul’s statement to the Philippians—*“Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (1:6). The tendency of the Church today is to put the weight on the human side—a weight which as Jesus told the Pharisees, “was grievous to be born,” and is as impossible for the believer in the New Testament, as it was for the Jews of the Old Covenant. Do not measure your faith by deliverance from trouble, but by grace to stand fast in the midst of the trouble.

So we have a great high priest. He has the power to accomplish His work in the heart of every believer. He does this, not by faithful religious observance, as in the Old Testament, but by the work of His Spirit within us. The sooner we understand the weakness of the flesh, the sooner we will come to rely on the power and presence of Christ within us. The evidence of this inward grace is the ability to stand in the midst of trouble and the desire to stay with Christ in spite of it.

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