

TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY

by Ray C. Stedman

Most of the arguments that are launched against the Christian faith today are based on a caricature, a distorted view of Christianity. When the world once sees the real thing, it has little to say in opposition. It is this true faith which the book of Hebrews so masterfully sets forth before us. It reveals clearly the difference between the false and the true. The false way of living as a Christian is to believe and try harder. That is the Avis Car Rental motto, "We Try Harder," and it appears in the common attitude, "I'll do my best, and God will do the rest." That sounds deceptively pious, even sanctimonious and very Christian, but it is utterly false! As we have been seeing in Hebrews, the true way is to believe and fully trust, for God is in you both to will and to work his good pleasure. Your willing is therefore his willing, unless he shows you differently; your working is his working, unless he shows you otherwise.

The last half of Chapter 10 sums it all up. The writer of this letter is drawing his presentation of the teaching of this passage to a conclusion. He strikes again the three dominant notes of the letter -- teaching, warning, and encouragement. More precisely, Verses 19 through 39 reveal:

- A provision which creates privilege,
- A presumption which invites punishment, and
- A fortitude which reveals faith.

That is our program.

In a nutshell, the secret of Christian living is described in this first section, the provision which creates privilege.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, 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. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; 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. {Heb 10:19-25 RSV}

Looking carefully at that passage you note twice the phrase, "we have." And following these there is repeated three times the phrase, "let us." "We have" marks provision, "let us" is privilege.

What do we have? "We have confidence," he says, "we have boldness to enter into the sanctuary." That is not a church building! I have a continuing quarrel against the practice of calling church buildings "sanctuaries." I understand what people mean by this, but I regard it as a very insidious concept, for, as I have pointed out before, there is no building on the face of the earth today that is properly called the house of God. If we call a building the house of God we miss the true message of the New Testament which is that the house of God is actually the bodies of men and women, boys and girls. That is where God dwells today. The true sanctuary, therefore, is the realm of the spirit in man.

It is pictured in the tabernacle. We have the outer court in the body, the holy place in the soul, and the Holy of Holies is the spirit of man. It was this into which we were forbidden to enter as long as we did not know Jesus Christ. We could not move into the realm of the spirit. Our spirits, the Bible says, were "dead in trespasses and sins," {Eph 2:1 KJV}. But, through the blood of Christ, a way has been opened into this area. When we became a Christian, for the first time we were able to operate on a spiritual level. Our spirits began to function.

We became, for the first time, complete human beings, operating as God intended man to operate.

It is this inner man that the writer is referring to as the sanctuary. We now come with boldness, he says, into the inner man, into the realm of the spirit, where we meet face to face with God. The spirit is the only part of man that can meet God. Unfortunately, there is a religion of the soul which is concerned primarily with beauty and esthetics, as beauty of form in architecture and music, etc. It is very popular but it is a religion of the soul, concerned primarily with the emotions. But the Lord Jesus once said to the woman at the well of Samaria, "The hour is coming, and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him," {John 4:23 RSV}. And the only acceptable worship to God today has nothing at all to do with buildings, organs, vestments, choirs, candles and all the rest. These things may mean something to us, but not to God. The only acceptable worship to God is that worship which takes place in the spirit, the inner shrine, the inner man.

We enter this, the writer says, by the blood of Jesus. It is the only way in. It is important to remember what he has already taught us in this letter about the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus refers not merely to the blood of the man, Jesus, but in a very real sense, as we have already learned, it represents also our blood. Jesus was our representative, he died in our place, he was "made sin for us" {cf, Gal 5:21}, so that what happened to him is what God sees as happening to us. This phrase, "the blood of Jesus" is a symbolic way of saying that we must be willing to accept the sentence of death on the natural man, that we must die to our own ability to do anything for God of ourselves. That is what he is talking about. The only way into the realm of the spirit where God can be enjoyed face to face is by accepting that sentence of death upon the natural man. There is nothing that man, in himself, can offer to God, nothing that he can contribute, nothing that God finds pleasurable or favorable. To accept that is to enter into the value of the blood of Jesus. The only thing we can contribute to God is what he has first given us. And if we think otherwise we can never enter into this realm. Our worship will only be on the level of the soul and, as such, is unacceptable. But we have a way into the sanctuary. Our death, in Jesus, has opened that way. In his dying on the cross, the Lord Jesus has rent the veil, i.e., the flesh, so that the way into the inner shrine of man is wide open and we can freely enter. That is the first provision.

The second one is, we have a great priest over the house of God. Remember what we have learned already in this letter as to what that house is. As the writer says distinctly in Chapter 3, "whose house we are," {Heb 3:6 KJV}. He is describing, then, the indwelling of Christ by the Spirit, the recognition of an indwelling Christ who offers to clothe himself with our personality and is prepared to live his life over again in our circumstances, right where we are. This is the greatest truth of Christian faith. Christianity is not some feeble effort on our part to live a shabby imitation of Jesus Christ. Christianity is Jesus Christ living his life again through us right where we are, in our circumstances. We have a completely available and thoroughly able priest in control over the house of God, whose house we are.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he says exactly the same thing. Writing to his dear friends in Philippi, he says, "We are the true circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, who glory in Christ Jesus [he is the one we count on], and who have no confidence in the flesh" [we have accepted God's sentence of death against the natural man] {Phil 3:3 RSV}. There is our complete provision: an awakened spirit and an adequate mediator.

Now, on that basis and that basis alone, the writer goes on to urge three things that we can do:

- Draw near,
- Speak out, and
- Stir up!

Take the first, "Draw near with a true heart." If I may put that in more modern terms, he is saying that we are to live continually in unfeigned dependence upon an indwelling Christ. "Draw near" means continually to walk in the presence of God. You do not draw near to God when you come to church. You are no nearer to him here than you are at work, at play, or wherever you are. If you have not learned how to draw near to him in everyday life, you will never learn how to draw near to him here. You draw near to God when you live in the recognition of his presence in your life all the time. That is what he asks us to do.

When we draw near on that basis these are the wonderful results:

First, "full assurance of faith." That means living out of adequacy; that means to discover a source of supply which never runs dry. Your dependence is no longer upon the weak abilities you may have as a natural man: your talents, your gifts, your training, your education. Your dependence now is upon the flowing power of the Spirit of the living God who dwells in you, a river of living water, a supply that never runs dry. That is living out of adequacy. You are prepared to meet any circumstance, not in trepidation or trembling, but in the quiet confidence that he who is in you is able to do everything that needs to be done. That is full assurance, is it not? Full assurance of faith.

The second result of drawing near is "a heart sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." There is freedom from guilt.

How did you sleep last night? Were you restless, did you twist and turn? Were you troubled by an evil or guilty conscience, perhaps a feeling of not having done the things you ought to have done?

Psychologists tell us the whole race of man is suffering from a guilty conscience. This is the basic human problem, but Jesus Christ has come to meet that problem. The heart that comes before God on the terms outlined here experiences a complete freedom from the sense of nagging guilt. It is true peace. You are "accepted in the Beloved," {Eph 1:6 KJV}. God has no issue with you that he will not make explicitly clear so that you may know it as well as he does, therefore you can be free from any undefined, nagging sense of guilt.

The third result is, "our bodies washed with pure water."

I can hear the Baptists saying "Amen" already, but unfortunately that phrase does not refer to baptism. There are some people who can find water baptism in every other verse of the Bible. But although it does mention water here, I am sure this is not a reference to water baptism primarily because it makes particular reference to "pure water" and it is very difficult to get pure water for water baptism. I have baptized individuals in some very muddy streams which would make the rite invalid if this phrase referred to baptism.

But this is, again, symbolic language, as is the rest of the verse. It refers to an outward life which has been cleansed, rearranged, changed by the new life in Christ. It means that thieves stop stealing, alcoholics stop drinking, liars stop lying, and sex sins come to an end. The whole life is changed because we have drawn near to God.

These are the things that are possible only as we approach on the basis outlined before: We come, accepting the sentence of death to all that is natural in us and depending on an indwelling Christ who is prepared to do through us everything that needs to be done. But even this is but step number one in the possibilities of a Christian life.

The second step to which we are urged is: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." That is, we are not only to draw near, but to speak out, to share the great secret. You can be confident that as you talk about what has happened to you, those who hear, acting upon the same basis as you acted, will experience the same results, for God is faithful. The One who has declared this is no respecter of persons. He will do as much for the man next door as he has done for you; he will do as much for the boss at the top of the heap as he does for the man at the bottom. It makes no difference; he is faithful. Therefore you can rely upon the fact, in sharing what God has done in you, that he will do it also in someone else. Speak out, then. Hold fast the confession of your hope without wavering!

The third privilege is, "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." How do you stir someone up to love and good works? These two things are always the mark of true Christianity. Christians are never judged by the confessions they make, or the creed they recite; it is always by their deeds. How much practical love have you manifested? How far have you responded to the cry for help from someone near you, someone who is destitute or disappointed, who needs an encouraging word or a helping hand or a generous check? This is the ultimate test.

How do you achieve this? He suggests two ways:

First, by not neglecting to meet together, that is very important: "Not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another." That suggests the character of the meetings. They are not to be discouraging meetings, they are to be encouraging meetings. They are to be meetings where you can hear again the tremendous, radical principles of Christian faith and to see again in human lives the mighty power of the One whom we worship and serve; and where you can understand how God works through human society, how he is transforming and changing men everywhere. To thus meet together is to encourage one another in these things. That is what Christian services ought to be like:

- To hear the Word of God so that it comes home with power to the heart, and
- To share with one another the results.

If our services were more like this, we would not have trouble in getting people to come out.

Too often church services are the kind pictured in the story of the father who was showing his son through a church building. They came to a plaque on the wall and the little boy asked, "Daddy, what's that for?" His father said, "Oh, that's a memorial to those who died in the service." The little boy said, "Which service, Daddy, the morning service or the evening service?"

But meetings of Christians are to be essentially encouraging things, and this is one way we stir up one another to love and good works.

The second way is a watchful awareness of the time. "All the more as you see the Day drawing near." "The Day" is the certain return of Jesus Christ. As evil becomes more subtle, as it becomes more and more difficult to tell the difference between truth and error, good and bad, right and wrong; as the clamant voices of our age pour out deceitful lies, and we find the whole of society permeated and infiltrated with false concepts that deny the truth of the Word of God, we need all the more to gather together and encourage one another by sharing the secrets of life in Christ Jesus.

You have the privilege of all three of these: Draw near, speak out, stir up! That is the whole Christian life in a nutshell. This is a privilege open to everyone, if you come on the proper basis. The only reason they escape you is because you have not come by the way outlined at the beginning of this passage. And be very careful!

Do not take this lightly, for, in the next section, the writer flashes a red light of warning. He goes on to speak of a presumption which invites punishment.

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and 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." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. {Heb 10:26-31 RSV}

What a somber passage!

What is this willful, deliberate sin that has such terrible results?

The tense of the word indicates immediately that this is not a single act of folly or weakness. This is not something one can stumble into suddenly. It is not the normal falterings of a Christian who is still learning how to walk in the Spirit. None of these is in view at all. The continuous present tense of this word, "sin deliberately," marks a long-continued attitude of resistance. It is, of course, the sin the writer has warned

against all along in Hebrews. It is the sin of knowing the principle of the denial of self in following Christ, and a consistent refusal to do so.

I ran across a startling phrase that beautifully expresses this. It is "the leukemia of noncommitment."

It is refusing to cease from our own works and enter into God's rest, refusing the cross in our life. It is choosing to live for self behind a Christian veneer, refusing the claims of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

This is not possible when this new arrangement for living is not yet clearly understood. I want that to be clear. This willful sin is never the sin of ignorance. It is a presumptuous choice of self living when we know perfectly well, from the Word of God, what the results of that choice will be. What the writer is saying here is that once that choice has been fully made (and by the grace of God this may take years), then there is no way back. It is exactly the same situation faced in Hebrews 6. There is certain judgment ahead, the writer says, "a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries." He argues from the less to the greater here. If this were true even under the shadows of the Law, if, when a man violated even these pictures of Christ and his work, he suffered death at the mouth of two or three witnesses, how much more shall he be culpable if he violates knowingly and deliberately the reality which is Jesus Christ?

This kind of sin, he goes on to point out, always involves three things:

There is, first, a spurning of the Son of God. He deliberately chooses a title for Jesus which emphasizes his right to be lord over life, "the Son of God." There is a consistent spurning of that, a refusal to buckle under, to acknowledge Christ's right to govern the life.

And there is also a profaning of the blood of Christ. That means a rejection of the principle referred to earlier, a refusal of the sentence of death that God has pronounced upon the natural life. It is presuming to approve what God condemns. It is to insist that our efforts to serve God ought to be accepted by him, even though he has said they are not acceptable. It is to insist that our religious activities ought to be enough, when God has said these things have all been set aside in the death of Christ. That is profaning the blood by which we are sanctified.

Then the third thing, the most serious of all, the outraging of the Spirit of grace. This is to treat with indifference (and indifference is always the cruelest form of hate) the pleadings, wooings, and leadings of the Spirit of God. It is to insult the Holy Spirit. This, then, is the dread "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," for which Jesus said there is no forgiveness, neither in this age nor in the world to come.

I am often asked, "Can Christians commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?" The answer is both "Yes" and "No." Christians who have declared that, come hell or high water, sink or swim, live or die, their only hope is the promise of Christ, who, when they find themselves sinning and failing, own up, and return to Christ, and trust him again, that kind of Christian can never commit the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. He is "born of God" and can never do this. But Christians who sin and do nothing about it, who resent the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who resist his authority, and do as they please regardless of what the Word of God says, that kind of Christian is in grave danger of this very thing. That is why this letter was written. Such prove themselves to be embryo Christians, as we saw in Hebrews 6, never born of God. They have entered into the initiatory relationship of the Christian life by the Holy Spirit, but never pass on to that taking of the yoke of Christ upon them that means a new birth. That kind can drift into this.

To put yourself into the hands of the living Christ is to trust him, and obey him; to believe that he is the truth, and you mean therefore to follow him, and do what he says, that is a glorious thing.

The hands of Christ are very frail
For they were broken with a nail
But only those reach Heaven at last
Whom those frail, broken hands hold fast.

It is one thing to put yourself into the hands of the living Christ; but to fall into the hands of the living God,

when you have professed one thing but have consistently, deliberately refused to obey it, that is quite another thing. The writer says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

We greatly need these words of warning. There is a cursed, superficial concept of God abroad today that is doing great damage to many. It is the idea of a palsy-walsy God who slaps you on the back and says, "Everything is fine, don't worry about a thing, I'm with you to the end no matter what you do."

God has never revealed himself like that. His self-revelation is continually other than this. The God whom we worship can be to us the very dearest person in the universe. He offers to be dearer and closer and more wonderful than any earthly friend can possibly be, but only on terms which, in his wisdom and grace, he has seen are absolutely necessary to make that relationship a permanent one. On any other terms he is not available.

There is not one of us who would dare defy the laws of chance by endlessly playing Russian roulette. We would know that sooner or later the laws of chance would catch up with us and we would be gone. If we were killed, it would be our own fault. Well, then, shall we defy the living God and think we can escape? This is what the author asks.

Yesterday on the front page of the local paper there was a picture of a man with a revolver in his hand standing over the crumpled body of a Vietnamese soldier. Underneath was the title, "The Price of Defection." The soldier was a traitor.

This is what the writer describes here, traitors to the cause they espouse, saying they are obeying Christ but consistently refusing to walk in his steps.

I know the question that is on your heart. It is, "How can I know whether I am one of these?" And the answer is in this last section.

There is here described a fortitude which reveals faith.

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

**"For yet a little while, and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry;
but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him."**

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls. {Heb 10:32-39 RSV}

In these words, the author recognizes that most of these to whom he writes had already given proof of true faith and genuine birth. Their early Christian years were marked by love and joy and hope, despite hardships and persecution. They had followed Christ at cost to themselves. They had submitted themselves to the Lordship of Christ, even when their own will would have been different. That is the mark of reality, the proof of faith. They cheerfully and compassionately accepted the persecutions, deprivations, and hardships that came their way. They took Christ's yoke upon them, obeyed his Lordship, and manifested it by love and good works. They were living by faith.

You can do these things only when you live by faith. When you have accepted God's word and recognized that Christ is who he says he is, that the history of the world is going to turn out as he says it is, and that the values of life are what he says they are, then, and then only, can you do this kind of thing.

Now they need to do only one more thing -- keep on! That is all. They are doing the right thing, just keep on doing it. The road will end at the dawning of a new day and the coming of the living God.

Does your way sometimes seem hard and difficult?

Is it, perhaps, often lonely and exposed to the reproach of others?

Well, do not despair, do not give up. That pattern has been predicted. That is part of Christian living today, as it has always been. For:

- If you live by faith;
- If you accept what this word says as true, and you see that it is working out in history exactly as God said it would;
- If you are counting on his strength to bring about all that he promises;

if you thus live by faith, then, though it be through scourgings and mockings, through perils and dangers, you will arrive for "the just shall live by faith," {Rom 1:17 KJV}.

That is the great sentence that burned in the heart of Martin Luther and lit the fires of the Reformation: "The just shall live by faith." Not by circumstances, not by outward appearances, but by faith in what the Word of God has declared. You need only to continue to reach the goal, to endure. It could well be translated, in modern parlance, by the word "toughness."

In Chapter 11, we shall see some illustrations of men and women who have lived by faith. These are the tough people of history. They have endured, they have toughed it out, they have stuck it out. They faced all the pressures, all the problems, all the confusing duplicity of life, but, because they had their eye fixed on One who never changes, they were tough; nothing could move them aside or divert them. Now, that is what the apostle is calling for, that inner toughness which meets life steadfastly, unmovably, unshakably, is never driven off its position of faith. It constantly meets every encounter, every challenge by resting upon the Word of God, relying upon what God said would take place.

God grant that we may find that toughness in these terrible and glorious days.

Prayer

Our Father, this has been a solemn passage we have looked at together, but we thank you for the truth which dares to speak even though it offends. We thank you, Lord, for the love which tells us the truth though it hurts. Keep us from the utter folly of taking these words and rationalizing them in some foolish manipulation that destroys their meaning. Give us the grace to be honest with thee, to look at ourselves earnestly and honestly, and to ask ourselves where we stand, and by thy grace, Lord, to lay hold of this marvelous way of deliverance, to yield the total man into the control of the total Lordship of Jesus Christ. We pray in his name, Amen.

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