

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART XI

CONFIDENCE IN THE NEW COVENANT WON BY CHRIST

I. The letter then goes from the theme that Jesus has established the new covenant to a call to place confidence that covenant. It begins this call to confidence by describing how Jesus allows us into that sanctuary in heaven through His flesh, which is the new curtain.

A. On one level, this curtain, which can be read as either Jesus' humanity or the Eucharist, veils His divinity as the curtain of the temple veiled the presence of God.

B. But on the other hand, in contrast to the Old Covenant, all the faithful can go through this veil to everlasting life. There is not only a future focus, but a confidence that we can approach the presence of God even now.

- As of old, when the ram and the goat were sacrificed at the Day of Atonement, so now Christ by His sacrificial blood allows us into that sanctuary.

- Jesus shows us the "new and living way" or, more literally the new and sacrificed way." The letter is probably contrasting with the way of life that Christ shows, having Himself blazed the path before us, and the way of death that is the result of sin. See, e.g., Prov. 4:10-27, 9:1-18. At one level, the path of wisdom has been known from of old, and the prophets spoke of the new path to life. See, e.g., Mic. 2:13, Is. 66:18-21.. But, on the other hand, Christ alone allows us really to pursue it to the end. See, e.g., John 14:3-6; Romans 5:12-21.

C. But , as the ancient high priests had to be purified symbolically before going into the Holy of Holies, so now the faithful must be truly purified from the flesh and an evil conscience. This cleansing fulfill the words of the prophets that God would sprinkle the people with clean water thus make them new people who would be guided more directly with the Spirit of God. See Ez. 18:30-32; 36:16-38; Zech. 13:1-5.

- The symbolism seems to be that the "pure water," which is apparently baptism cleanses the body from sin. The idea is that, because of common human nature, we have received common sinfulness, and baptism cleanses that curse. See Romans 6:1-11; Gal. 3:27; Titus 3:5.

- However, in addition, our hearts must be "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." There may be a reference here to the sprinkling of the people with water that was sanctified from the ashes of the sacrificed red heifer. This water was used to sprinkle a person who had contact with a corpse. See Lev. 19. The idea seems to be that, through sin, we have contact with final death, and we are sprinkled clean of that guilt. There is also a purification from leprosy through the blood of two clean birds. See Lev. 14. Leprosy is a common symbol of the corruption of sin, and thus this cleansing would likewise be a symbol of cleansing from works of death. The letter itself does not make clear how that cleansing takes place, but rather simply states the need for it.

II. The letter then says that, having been cleansed of sinfulness, the Christian must now hold fast to his "confession of our hope." Confession here means more than a belief, but rather a witness to the faith. See Matt. 5:16; Rom. 1:10, Titus 1:16.

A. Connected with that confession are the good works that show forth and confirm the faith. The Christians do not perform simply good works on their own, but encourage each other along those lines and thus give witness to the world. See John 17:22.

B. By implication, the faithful must gather together in assembly, for they need each other to advance in good works. Elsewhere, too, Paul speaks of the Church as the body of Christ in which each person helps all others. See, e.g., Romans 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-31. Then as now many people neglected this common sense practice.

C. The letter warns that "the day" is drawing near. The reference seems to be to the day of the Lord that St. Paul refers to in other letters. See 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:5-10. The reference could also be to the destruction of the temple as an image of the final destruction of the world. See, e.g., Matt. 24:1-24; Mk. 13:1-37. But there is also a notion that the day of the Lord is ever near, especially now that the crucial choice must be made. See Heb. 3:13.

III. The letter then warns of the consequences of failing in faith.

A. The letter says dramatically that, if one has received the knowledge of the faith, but sins deliberately, the sacrifice of Christ is no longer efficacious for him. St. Thomas viewed such a deliberate sin as either mortal sin or a rejection of the faith.

- The notion is probably similar to the sin against the Holy Spirit that Jesus warned of. See Matt. 12:31-32; Mk. 3:28-29; Luke 12:10-12. The context in this letter is probably closest to the scene described in Luke, where Jesus warns of the

persecutions to come. Pope John Paul II said that the sin against the Holy Spirit is above all a refusal to accept the salvation God offers through the Holy Spirit. *Dominum et Vivicantem* 46.

B. As with the similar warning in chapter 6, the idea is not that God would not under any circumstance forgive a lapse of faith but rather: (1) so long as the failure of faith is there, God's forgiveness does not reach the person; (2) it is worse to receive the faith and then lapse than never to have understood it, see 2 Peter 2:21; and possibly (3) if one lapses under pressure and then returns to the faith, there will always be uncertainty about whether one has truly put faith in God.

C. The warning about fire implies that all things that do not come from God are impermanent and therefore will be burned when the fire of the Lord's day comes. See, e.g., Is. 26:11. Fire is a sign of God's holiness as with Pentecost, see Acts 2:3, see also Dan. 7:9; Rev. 1:14; and God guides His people through the fires of danger, see, e.g., Is. 43:5. But the imperfect are purified by God's fire, see, e.g., Ez. 22:20, 1 Cor. 3:13-15, while God's enemies are destroyed by it. See, e.g., Ps. 97:3; Is. 66:24.

D. As evidence, the letter cites the fact that the Mosaic law condemned idolaters among God's chosen people to death by stoning. See Duet. 17:1-7. That command may be no longer effective on earth, but it is an image of the eternal law of God, which respects human freedom to the point of taking seriously a person's rejection of Christ.

E. This passage does appeal to fear of divine punishment, which is not the highest of motives. See 1 John 4:18. However, the letter indicates that it is still a legitimate motive. See, e.g., Matt. 10:28. Furthermore, there is a rightful excitement or thrill at the challenge of avoiding anything that might offend God. See Ps. 111:10; Wis. 1:9; Is. 11:3; Rev. 14:7, 15:4.

IV. Turning to a more positive note, the letter refers back to former struggles that the Christian converts had endured.

A. The letter describes both public beatings of Christians and the confiscation of property. Acts of the Apostles refers to many of these persecutions, and includes some deaths, a punishment that the readers of this letter have not yet suffered. See Heb. 12:4. It commends the readers on having endured such things, and also on having had compassion on others who were enduring it. For, to minister to a Christian who was suffering would often mean drawing the persecution upon oneself.

B. Referring back to the themes that the earthly covenant, with the Temple, the sacrifices, and the land, is but an image of heavenly worship, the letter points out that earthly possessions are but an image of the heavenly ones and assumes that the reason

the Christians gave up earthly goods was that they understood this principle.

C. However, since the persecutions had lessened for some time, the people were in danger of growing lax, and so the letter must remind them of the need for endurance.

V. This section on the new covenants ends with two quotations from the prophets about the importance of perseverance.

A. The paragraph quoted begins with a passage from Isaiah regarding the coming day of the Lord that will bring in a new nation, but punish those who oppose it.

B. The second, more extensive quotation is from Habukuk, a prophet of the time just before the Babylonian conquest of the Promised Land in 597 B.C. The prophesy itself is a statement of confidence in God despite all the corruption in Israel and the threat of Babylon. It is quoted by S. Paul both in Romans and Galatians in the context of a discourse on how Jesus saves us by His righteousness, rather than by adherence to the law. See Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11

C. This section ends by saying "we" are not among those who draw back and are destroyed. The author is identifying himself with the readers here, indicating he understands their fear, but also shares with them the promise of everlasting life.