

Strength at Wit's End

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study we learned of a new and radical principle of human behavior which every true Christian will learn and practice in this present life, or the absence of it will prove he has never had a real conversion and has no right to call himself a Christian. This principle, then, is not an option. It is not something we can choose to accept or ignore. It is the whole goal of God's work in human hearts. This principle is called in Hebrews "the rest of God," it is activity out of rest. It is to cease from our self-directed activities, the principle upon which we have lived our human lives ever since we were babies, convinced that we had what it takes to do what we wanted to do, or, at least, could get what it takes from some human source. But this new principle, made available to us only in Jesus Christ, means to cease our self-directed activities and trust in the ability of a second Person to work through us.

That is exactly what faith is. Every one of you has been exercising faith ever since you came into this auditorium; you have been trusting in the work of another person. Though I watched carefully, I did not see a single one of you pick up one of these chairs and examine it to see whether or not it would support you if you sat on it. You took it by faith, you exercised trust in the maker of the chair. Though you do not have the least idea who he is, whether he is a rascal or trustworthy, you have simply taken it for granted and have been exercising a faith which has been supporting you all along. We make faith so difficult, but it is simply trusting in the work of another.

And that is what the life of rest is, trusting in the Lord Jesus who has come to indwell our hearts, to do through us all that we do, using the functions of our human personality to do so. That is rest. It takes away from us our favorite excuse for failure. It demands we stop justifying our failure by saying,

"Well, after all, I'm only human." For this principle proposes to meet every situation, not with human wisdom, but with divine; not with human strength, but with God's strength; not by the exercise of sheer will power, but by the exercise of absolute trust.

The previous section in Hebrews closed with Verse 13:

And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. {Heb 4:13 RSV}

This "one with whom we have to do," Jesus Christ, knows us thoroughly, sees everything about us. Nothing is hidden from his gaze, we are absolutely open and naked before him. He knows our weaknesses. He knows that when temptation is heavy upon us, when we are being harassed and irritated by the children or the boss or our mother-in-law, and are about to explode, he knows we shall be strongly tempted to give way, to fight back, to lose our temper and say things we ought not. The Lord knows that when we are treated unfairly, perhaps have done the right thing but are blamed for it, even insulted over it, there is a strong, almost overpowering urge to strike back, to get even, to do something to even the score. He knows that there is in the human heart a great hunger for acceptance by those around us, that we are very uncomfortable when we are in a crowd of people and feel we must act differently than they. He knows how we want to be accepted by those around us. He knows, too, that under those circumstances of pressure we will tend to excuse our failure by saying, "Well, I know I should lean on the Lord, but the provocation here is too great. I can take it up to a point, but if it gets too strong, I know I will give in."

Because of this tendency to excuse ourselves when the pressure gets too great, the writer now says in effect, "I want you to take a closer look at the great High Priest who is our strength, our refuge, our fortress, our enabler."

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. {Heb 4:14-16 RSV}

Four words in that brief passage sum up all it has to say, "the throne of grace." It is fashionable in some circles these days to view the Protestant Reformation as a great mistake, something that we should feel ashamed of and work to heal by the Ecumenical Movement of our day. But it is interesting to note that wherever there has been genuine renewal in the Catholic Church (or the Protestant Church), it has been a return to the great principles of the Reformation reflected in this passage. The reformers, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others, nailed to the masthead of their movement three great principles taken from the Scriptures:

- No sacrifice but Calvary;
- No priest but Christ;
- No confessional but the throne of grace!

With these three mighty principles they turned Europe upside down during the Middle Ages. The Christian finds power only as there is a return to these great things declared here.

Here is the throne of grace. A throne speaks of authority and power, while grace conveys the idea of sympathy and understanding. These two thoughts are combined in Jesus Christ. He is a man of infinite power, yet in complete and utter sympathy with us. He said himself, after his resurrection, "All power is given unto me, in heaven and in earth," {Matt 28:18 KJV}. His title here is, "Jesus, the Son of God" possessing the fullness of deity. But more than that, he is the one who has "passed through the heavens." In this space age, this phrase should catch our eye. Jesus not only

passed into the heavens but through the heavens. This is the point the writer is making.

When we put a couple of men into a rocket and hurl them into space from Cape Kennedy, we are throwing them into the heavens. They are still within this space-time continuum. Even if they landed on the moon this would be true; or to the nearest planets or the outermost reaches of our solar system. Could they reach the farthest star we know anything about, which seems utterly impossible now, men would still be in the heavens. But the claim made for Jesus is that he has passed through the heavens, he has passed outside the limits of time and space. He is no longer contained within, limited by, those boundaries that hold us within physical limits. He is outside, above, beyond, over all, therefore there are no limits to his power.

It is wrong to think of this relationship in terms of space. Growing up as children there is a tendency to think of heaven as "out there" in space somewhere, on one of the stars, perhaps, some great distance removed from earth. Because of the figurative language employed in Scripture, we think of going "up" to heaven and "down" to hell. It was this that Bishop Robinson seized upon in his book, *Honest to God* and pushed to unwarrantable extremes. But surely the idea that is conveyed to us by the figurative language of the Scriptures is that heaven is outside time and space, therefore it can be within us as well as around us, above us, and beyond us. The throne of grace is not in remote space; it is right in the heart of a believer in whom Jesus Christ dwells. To come to the throne of grace does not mean to go into a prayer closet and shut the door and address an appeal across the reaches of space to some distant point in heaven. It means to reckon upon the One who indwells us. The throne of grace is that close to us, that available to us.

The writer also makes clear that though the Lord Jesus has passed into the place of supreme power, and has absolutely no limits upon his ability to work, he also is tremendously concerned with our problems. He says, "we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities." It is almost an indignant retort to some sly accusation, "We do not have," he says, "a priest who is remote from us, who is isolated from us, who does not understand what we are going through." Previously in this letter Jesus has been

called "the pioneer of our salvation," {cf, Heb 2:10}. This is the thought of the phrase here. He has already gone the whole course before us. He has felt every pressure, he has known every pull, he has been drawn by every allurements we face, he has been frightened by every fear, beset by every anxiety, depressed by every worry. Yet he did it without failure, without sinning. Never once did he fall. "Therefore," the writer says, "let us draw near with boldness, with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help every time we need it." That is, all the time. Every help you need, every time you need it!

Now it is right at this point that the tempter pulls the neatest trick of the year. He suggests to us Christians that we file this verse away in our conscious mind as a creed to which we pay lip service. We say to each other, "Yes, it is true, Jesus has been tempted in every point as we have, yet without sin." We take that out and quote it any time we are exposed to doctrinal questioning. We love to quote it to others, especially. But the tempter, at the same time, jams into our subconscious mind a very slimy doubt. He suggests to us a limitation which we hardly let ourselves think about; that there is one area in which Jesus did not undergo the same temptation we have. "Of course Jesus never failed," the devil suggests, "because he had one great advantage over you, he had no sin nature."

It is true that Jesus was not beset by the devilish pull of sin in the flesh, such as we experience. His virgin birth protected him from that. Therefore, deep in our subconscious, hardly allowing it to come to the surface, we feel there is pressure we can undergo that he has never felt, there is power exerted upon us that he does not understand. That doubt pops out in times of pressure, and says to us, "Go on, give in! You can't fight this to the end. You're weak in this area. You haven't the strength to stand. The Lord will forgive you, for, after all, that's his job, so go ahead and give in. You are too weak, too human to resist."

To answer that subtle argument fully, the writer brings before us the qualifications of a high priest. These are now briefly set before us:

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with

the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was. {Heb 5:1-4 RSV}

We can dispose of this rather briefly. The writer is not speaking of Jesus Christ, he is listing the regulations, the qualifications, the requisites to be a priest in Israel. Here we learn what a priest really is. Perhaps you think of a priest as a man wearing a long, black robe, with his collar turned backwards, but that has nothing to do with priesthood. Perhaps you think the purpose of a priest is to baptize, marry, and bury, or, as someone has put it, "to hatch, match, and dispatch." But that is not the task of a priest. The qualifications for a priest are right here:

1. A priest must first be a man, in order to represent men. To this end the Lord Jesus laid aside his glory as God, though he was equal with God, as Paul tells us, and humbled himself and became a man. He entered the human race as a babe in Bethlehem.
2. Second, a priest must offer sacrifices, that is, he must deal with the problem that separates man from God. He must come to grips with the awful universal problem of guilt, for this is the cloud over our lives that haunts us, stays with us, dogs our footsteps, and brings us into bondage every way we turn. It is universal among men. No man has ever been known that does not have and suffer from a sense of guilt. The answer to guilt is life sacrificed and a priest must therefore offer sacrifice. The Lord Jesus eminently and adequately fulfilled this in his cross when he himself became not only the priest but the Victim. He offered himself, through the eternal Spirit of God, as a sacrifice for the guilt of men.
3. The third qualification of a priest is that he must himself be beset with weakness and sin in order that he might understand the problems of others. Here is the problem, is it not? How could Jesus Christ fulfill this and still be sinless? How could he live as a man and never sin, and yet understand how we feel when we

sin? This is the area the enemy seizes upon to dislodge our faith when we come into times of intense pressure and trial. We will return to this in a moment, for this is the whole point of the passage.

4. The fourth qualification of a priest is that he must be appointed by God. "One does not take the honor upon himself, but is called by God just as Aaron was." No man can ordain priests, only God can. The purpose of a priest, then, is to cleanse and strengthen, to make us fit for life. If a priest does not do that, he is worthless. He must make men fit for life.

The last section, Verses 5-10, reveals the credentials of Jesus, the way he fully and adequately met every requirement of priesthood.

**So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,
"Thou art my Son,
today I have begotten thee";
as he says also in another place,
"Thou art a priest for ever,
after the order of Melchizedek."
{Heb 5:5-6 RSV}**

Those two quotations answer Points 1 and 4 of the qualifications we have listed. Begotten as a babe in the womb of Mary and born in Bethlehem, Jesus became a man, fully one with us in the essential humanity of our life. At the age of thirty he entered upon the priesthood; not the priesthood of Aaron but a new order, called *Melchizedek*, of which we will learn much more as we go on in Hebrews. This priesthood was predicted in the Scriptures and fulfilled when Jesus entered into his ministry and set about to do his Father's will. He was appointed by God unto this work.

Verses 7-8 take up the crucial matter. How could he never sin, yet fully sympathize with sinners?

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being

designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. {Heb 5:7-10 RSV}

How can he sympathize, how does he understand our pressures, if he has never sinned? The answer to that leads us into the dark shadows of Gethsemane. There is no other incident in the gospels that fits the description of this passage where, with prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, he cried unto him who was able to save him from death. As the Lord and his disciples left the Upper Room they passed through the dark valley of the Kidron, up unto the side of the Mount of Olives to the olive tree grove where it was his custom to go. Separating three of the more sensitive of the disciples, Peter, James and John, he withdrew with them into the deeper shadows of the garden. There followed a protracted period of excruciating torment of spirit that found expression in loud, involuntary cries, streaming tears, and ending in a terrible bloody sweat.

Here we come face to face with mystery:

1. There is, first, the total unexpectedness of this to the Lord. He had gone to the garden as was his custom, but there he suddenly began to be greatly distressed and troubled. Nothing like this is recorded of him before. In his anticipation of what he would be going through and his explanations of it to the disciples, he had never once mentioned Gethsemane.
2. Furthermore, there is no prediction of this in the Old Testament. There is much that predicts what he would go through on the cross; there is not one word of what he endured in the garden.
3. In the midst of his bafflement, puzzlement, deep unrest of heart, and distress of soul, he does an unusual and amazing thing. For the first time in his ministry he appealed to his own disciples for help. He said to them, "Watch with me, pray with me." He asked them to bear him up in prayer as he went further into the shadows, falling first to his knees and then to his face, crying out before the Father. There he prayed three separate times and each prayer is a questioning of the necessity of this experience. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." He was beseeching the Father to make clear to him whether this was a neces-

sary activity, so unexpected was this, so suddenly had it come upon him, baffling him, confusing him, bewildering him, just as sudden experiences and catastrophes come bewilderingly to us.

To deepen the mystery of this, there is the awful intensity of this struggle. This passage in Hebrews clearly implies that the Lord Jesus is here facing the full misery which sin produces in the heart of the sinner while he is yet alive, what we call "the sense of sin." I think we can even analyze this further. The three-fold period of wrestling in the garden suggests that he was here being exposed to the full intensity of what makes sin in our lives so defeating, so unshakable, that which makes up a sense of sin: shame, guilt, and despair.

- What is shame? Who of us has not felt it? Shame is a sense of my own defilement. It is an awareness of my unfitness. It is self-contempt, a loathing of myself. It is not being able to look myself in the face because I have been false to my standards, my ideals. As the Lord Jesus went into the darkness of the garden and fell upon his face, suddenly, for the first time in his experience, he began to feel ashamed. All the naked filth of human depravity forced itself upon him and he felt the burning, searing shame of our misdeeds as though they were his. No wonder he trembled in agony and amazement and sought to flee. He cried to the Father, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless," he adds, "not my will, but thine, be done," {cf, Luke 22:42}.

Remember that he came then to the disciples and woke them with an almost piteous plea to watch with him. "Could you not watch with me one hour?" he said {cf, Matt 26:40}.

- Returning again to the shadows, a greater inward horror came upon him. He began to feel a sense of guilt. What is guilt? Guilt is the sense of injury done to someone else. Guilt is the awareness of damage that I have caused to the innocent or the undeserving. The Lord Jesus was borne to the ground by an overwhelming sense of dark and awful guilt. He felt himself a culprit before God. He felt himself a child of wrath, eminently deserving judgment.

He writhed in silent torment among the olives, and Mark tells us he began to pray more earnestly than ever before, "Father, since this cup cannot pass from me, then thy will be done," {cf, Matt 26:42}.

Once again he came to his disciples and finding them sleeping he went back. He did not awaken them but let them sleep on.

- The third experience of agony was the worst of all. Before it began the Father sent an angel to strengthen him. This is what is meant by the words here, "He was heard for his godly fear." Crying out to the Father in his deep and desperate need, the Father answered and strengthened him through an angel. When the angel had finished ministering to him, the third and most terrible experience began. Our Lord began to know despair. The iron bands of sin's enslaving power were fully felt. He was crushed under a sense of hopelessness, of helpless discouragement, of utter defeat. His eyes filled with tears, his mouth was opened in involuntary, agonized cries, his heart was crushed as in a wine press, so that the blood was literally forced from his veins and his sweat fell to the ground in great, bloody drops.

This explains the strange words, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

He learned what it means to obey God when every cell in his body wanted to disobey, when everything within him cried out to flee this experience. Yet, knowing this to be the will of God, he obeyed, trusting God to see him through. He learned what it feels like to hang on when failure makes us want to throw the whole thing over, when we are so defeated, so utterly despairing, so angry with ourselves, so filled with shame, self-loathing and guilt that we want to forget the whole thing. He knows what this is like, he went the whole way, he took the full brunt of it. You and I will never pass through a Gethsemane like he went through. He went the whole distance.

Verse 9 carries us on the cross. "Being made perfect" – having entered into all that any sinner in all his weakness ever knows – "being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." That is the language of discipleship. When we obey him, as he obeyed the Father, then

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all that God is, is made available to us, just as in the hour of his anguish, all that God is was made available to him on this principle of trust.

How did he win? On the same principle that is set before us. He absolutely refused to question the Father's wisdom. He refused to strike back at God, to blame him, to say this was unfair. He took no refuge in unbelief even though this came suddenly and unexpectedly upon him. Instead, he cast himself upon the Father's loving, tender care and looked to him to sustain him. When he did, he was brought safely through and was thus perfected for priesthood. So we read, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." No matter how deep, how serious that need may be, he can fully meet it, though we may be at wit's end.

In Psalm 107 there is a wonderful verse, "At their wit's end they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out ..." Based on that verse a wonderful poem has been written:

Are you standing at Wit's End Corner,
Christian, with troubled brow?
Are you thinking of what is before you
And all you are bearing now?
Does all the world seem against you
And you in the battle alone?
Remember – at Wit's End Corner
Is just where God's power is shown.

Are you standing at Wit's End Corner,
Your work before you spread
All lying begun, unfinished
And pressing on heart and head
Longing for strength to do it,
Stretching out trembling hands?

Remember – at Wit's End Corner
The Burden-Bearer stands.

Are you standing at Wit's End Corner?
Then you're just in the very spot
To learn the wondrous resources
Of him who faileth not;
No doubt to a brighter pathway
Your footsteps will soon be moved
But only at Wit's End Corner
Is the "God who is able" proved.

It is at Wit's End Corner, driven by the Spirit into the place where the pressure is so great that we have no other recourse but to cry out to God for help, that at last we begin to learn. It breaks upon our dull, slow minds that this help is not something intended for emergency situations only. This dependence on him is the principle upon which God expects us to meet every circumstance. It is thus we enter into rest.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you that the Garden of Gethsemane was not mere play acting upon a stage. The Lord Jesus did not come into the world to perform a role, he fully entered into life. He went the whole way, he bore the full brunt. Help us, then, to obey these simple words of admonition: To come with confidence, with boldness, to the throne of grace that is within us from which all help comes, all light is streaming, all hope is flaming. Make these words real in our experience. In Christ's name, Amen.

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